Whatever Keeps Me Flesh: On the Grotesque in Asian Women's Poetry

Allyson Ang

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Pimone Triplett

Linda Bierds

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Allyson Ang

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Pimone Triplett

Department of English

This essay examines how contemporary Asian and Asian American women poets employ the grotesque in their poetry as a way to explore and critique white supremacy, imperialism, and patriarchy. After situating their work within the personal context of my own creative writing and the larger context of the literary grotesque as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin and Mary Russo, I will do a close reading of the poems "Manhole Humanity" by Korean poet Kim Hyesoon and "Chatroulette" by Korean American poet Franny Choi, exploring how these poems make use of the grotesque alongside other form, craft, and thematic elements.

I. Preface: The Wound That Opens Every Morning

In the summer of 2020, I bled for 48 days.

After starting a new form of birth control in the hopes of eradicating my pesky menstrual cycle once and for all, I was instead cursed with a seemingly endless period that left my body and my relationship with it in shambles. I felt that my suffering was unprecedented, akin to the plight of Jesus Christ as he was tormented by the devil for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert--except my situation was worse because it was eight days longer. I was a martyr, and worst of all, no one wanted to hear about my pain because it was related to the shame of my body. And I had deeply internalized that shame: I was mortified that my body was malfunctioning, betraying its proper function, distancing me even further from an already fraught womanhood.

I have never felt my period to be a particularly empowering experience. Instead of making me feel connected to my body, my feminine power, or the cycles of the moon, my period makes me feel like there's a malicious parasite inhabiting my body, controlling my every thought, emotion, and fluid. Nearly every night, I would dream of blood--gushing, leaking, staining everything around me. In the morning, I would go to the bathroom and be filled with despair when I realized that the flood had not yet ended.

By the end of the 48 days, I was convinced that my body would surely run out of blood. Even when the seemingly ceaseless tides finally ebbed, I feared that I would never feel at home in my defective flesh prison again. I felt like an alien, a monster, some kind of inhuman creature. I worried that at any moment, my body would betray me again. Every day, I fantasized about transcending my body once and for all, leaving it and all of its disgusting failure behind. Instead, I did what I always do: I wrote a poem.

This was my induction into the grotesque in my writing.

II. Introduction: The Cave of Abjection

A man awakens to find himself transformed into a giant bug. A hideous hunchback wistfully watches the Parisian streets from the towers of Notre-Dame. A young scientist creates a eight-foot-tall sapient monster who is shunned from society for his terrifying visage. While these are perhaps among the most iconic examples of the grotesque in Western literature, the grotesque is more than simply depictions of misunderstood monstrous bodies. It is a trope in literature often associated with satire and tragicomedy that evokes in readers a sense of simultaneous pity, revulsion, and even pleasure.

The grotesque inhabits the borderlands between the natural and the unnatural, between fantasy and reality. It resists easy definition or classification, in part due to the fact that its usage as a term dates back to the fifteenth century and has evolved dramatically since then; however, in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1965), philosopher and literary critic Mikahil Bakhtin writes that the grotesque is characterized by its fundamental attributes of exaggeration, hyperbole, and excessiveness (303). He goes on to explain,

> In the example of the grotesque the object of mockery is a specific negative phenomenon, something that 'should not exist' (*nichtseinsollendes*). [In] this fact [is] the basic nature of the grotesque: it exaggerates and caricatures the negative, the inappropriate. In the author's mind this distinguishes the grotesque from the *clownish* and from *burlesque*. In the first two forms of the comic there can also be exaggeration, but they lack the satiric orientation toward the inappropriate. Moreover, exaggeration in the grotesque acquires an extreme, fantastic character (306).

While the grotesque shares certain characteristics with other forms of the comic, including the clownish and the burlesque, the grotesque is unique in its fantastical and inappropriate elements.

It evokes in its audience a simultaneous pleasure and repulsion, a feeling akin to seeing a beloved cartoon character inflated into a parade float, its features bloated, distorted, unrecognizable from the figure you hold dear.

While some of the writers most commonly associated with the grotesque include Kafka, Rabelais, Hugo, and Shakespeare, the grotesque is deeply connected and concerned with the female body. In fact, one of the earliest examples of the grotesque that Bakhtin cites are terracotta figures found in the ancient city of Kerch that depicted “senile, pregnant hags.” He writes,

> This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is a pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying flesh and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body (25-26).

While Bakhtin does not delve into the gendered implications of this image, it is very clear that the horror of these terracotta figures is derived from their femaleness; more specifically, their transgressive femaleness, by which I mean any expression of femininity that violates the acceptable social standard of womanhood. Any woman who is not white (in a Western context), young, cisgender, heterosexual, thin, able-bodied, and conventionally attractive is transgressing womanhood in some way, whether or not they are aware of it. The fact that they are swollen and sagging, close to death yet ripe and fertile, marks these hags as not-quite-women. Rather, they are something else entirely, something grotesque.

In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (1995), Mary Russo writes: “The word [grotesque] itself, as almost every writer on the topic feels obliged to mention sooner or later, evokes the cave--the grotto-esque. Low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral.

As bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body" (Russo 1). While the associations between the grotesque and the "grotto-esque" female body are problematic and bio-essentialist, there is still something distinctly grotesque about womanhood and something distinctly female about the grotesque, and part of that distinct femaleness lies in the grotesque's association with shame, degradation, and disgust. Russo writes: "It is an easy and perilous slide from these archaic tropes to the misogyny which identifies this hidden inner space with the visceral. Blood, tears, vomit, excrement--all the detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion (predominantly, though not exclusively) on the side of the feminine--are down there in that cave of abjection" (Russo 2).

This "cave of abjection" is a place that has fascinated me both as a reader and a writer for many years. As a pre-teen discovering poetry for the first time via T.S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, and Shakespeare, I didn't understand what the writers were doing on the level of form, image, allusion, or even their thematic concerns most of the time. What I did understand was the peculiar feeling that took root in my stomach as I read the lines "Do I terrify?-- / The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth? / The sour breath / Will vanish in a day. / Soon, soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me / And I a smiling woman" in Plath's "Lady Lazarus" (1960). Before I really started reading or writing poetry, I assumed that the "point" of writing a poem was to make it beautiful. Plath's vivid images were beautiful but also disturbing, even frightening, something that I didn't even know was possible in poetry.

As I became a more rigorous reader and writer of poetry, I found myself drawn to poets, particularly queer Asian poets, who wrote about the body in subversive (and sometimes even gross) ways, including Franny Choi, Chen Chen, Marilyn Chin, and Sally Wen Mao, but it was

only recently, when I started reading South Korean poet Kim Hyesoon, that I realized my obsession with the grotesque. At the beginning of 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, I went to Open Books with my friend and classmate Anna and picked up a book at random because the cover caught my eye: *All the Garbage of the World, Unite!* by Kim Hyesoon (Action Books 2011). I opened the book to a poem titled "Strawberries" and read the lines: "A full plate of red tongues arrived / They quivered like the tongues of the choir members as they sang the hymns / Your tongue is placed on top of my tongue / Our tongues are getting goose bumps.../ I was afraid that the red water would rise if I bit down on the red things in my mouth that my face had vomited endlessly, so I just kept them in my mouth" (31). I had never read anything like it--Kim's writing was surreal, erotic, odd, disgusting, and utterly fascinating. As I devoured every book of hers that I could get my hands on, I was filled with questions: *What do I make of the seemingly disparate, surreal images that make up this poem*? *What is happening on a logistical or narrative level? Does it even matter?* I quickly found that it didn't. I put aside my need to make sense of a poem through narrative logic and just let myself get lost in the sensory experience of her writing. And god, it was decadent. Reading her work in all of its bizarre, enchanting, revolting glory opened my eyes to the weird and magnificent possibilities that poetry can hold.

Although the grotesque is associated with disgust, freakishness, and ugliness, it is also liberatory in its abjection. To embrace the grotesque is to eschew expectations of what a body should be. Russo writes: "The grotesque body was exuberantly and democratically open and inclusive of all possibilities. Boundaries between individuals and society, between genders, between species, and between classes were blurred or brought into crisis in the inversions and hyperbole of carnivalesque representation. Grotesque realism presented a dynamic, materialist,

and unflinching view of human bodies in all stages and contours of growth, degeneration, anomaly, excess, loss, and prosthesis" (78). This is what really drew me to the grotesque--as a racialized non-binary and queer person who has never felt truly aligned with womanhood (or manhood for that matter), I too have felt like my body is abnormal, disgusting, in excess, and freakish, and seeing the ways in which poets embraced the perceived strangeness of their queer racialized bodies through the grotesque.

In this essay, I will be doing a close reading of two poems by Asian women poets that employ the grotesque: the sonnet crown "Chatroulette" by Franny Choi from *Soft Science* (2019), and "Manhole Humanity" by Kim Hyesoon from *All the Garbage of the World, Unite!* (2011). Both of these poems use the grotesque as a way to explore Asian womanhood, white supremacy and patriarchy, and how the body is shaped by and resists these oppressive forces.

III. To See, To Come: Franny Choi's "Chatroulette"

Franny Choi's second full-length poetry collection, *Soft Science* (Alice James Books 2019), explores queer Asian American womanhood and how it blurs the boundaries between the human and the machine. From the epigraph to the language and syntax of the poems, *Soft Science* is haunted by influences from Donna Haraway's iconic essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," (1985), which posits that the twentieth-century breakdowns of the borders between the human and the animal, the natural and the artificial, and the physical and the non-physical have made modern humans into cyborgs (2). Haraway further suggests that "'women of color' might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities" (29), and this question of racialized women's not-quite-humanity is a central concern of Choi's work. By virtue of their non-whiteness, women of color are excluded from the Often,

the speaker of her poems is a cyborg (for example, in "The Cyborg Wants to Make Sure She Heard You Right," "Shokushu Goukan for the Cyborg Soul," "The Cyborg Meets the Drone at a Family Reunion and Fails to Make Small Talk"); in particular, a racialized and gendered cyborg. In doing so, Choi underscores the ways in which Asian women (particularly queer Asian women) are denied their full humanity and relegated to the category of robot, sex object, or both.

Alongside the figure of the cyborg, Choi employs the grotesque as a way to examine the ways that queer Asian American women are simultaneously forced to conform to the standards of white cisgender heterosexual femininity and punished when they inevitably fail. One of the sharpest examples of this is the sonnet crown "Chatroulette," in which Choi interrogates the monstrous Asian female body and how it is dehumanized and fetishized through pornography and other forms of consumption.

The title of this series of poems refers to a website called Chatroulette which was launched in 2009 and pairs users randomly for webcam-based video interactions. While Chatroulette's terms of use forbid nudity, it quickly became notorious for teeming with perverts, predators, and penises. It was also, as one might expect, a nightmare for women, people of color, and anyone else with a marginalized identity who didn't want to be subjected to slurs and harassment from strangers. Though Chatroulette has fallen out of vogue since its late-aughts heyday, many late millennials still have vivid memories of logging onto Chatroulette as preteens after we were supposed to be asleep, simultaneously fascinated and terrified by the ungoverned sexuality it held.

Choi's sonnet crown takes place within the landscape of this website, in which the speaker logs on to look and be looked at by an audience of men. "Chatroulette" is distinct from many other poems in this collection in that it employs very earthy, visceral, and bodily imagery

rather than the mechanical, robotic, cyborgian imagery of much of the rest of the book. Choi's sonnets are written in iambic pentameter, consist of three quatrains and a final couplet, and are very closely aligned with the traditional Shakespearean sonnet. While they do not follow the strict rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet and are instead written in blank verse, Choi's sonnets sometimes make use of slanted and perfect end rhymes, such as "made" and "vertebrate," or "soaked" and "choke." These rhymes invoke an echo of the Shakespearean sonnet even though they don't quite conform to its rules. The poem's form, which is very regimented and often associated with "highbrow" poetry, contrasts with the surprising, visceral, and grotesque language it uses.

"Chatroulette" opens with the line "To see, to come, I brought myself online," which plainly states the speaker's purpose and the central concerns of this poem: looking and sexual pleasure. It is worth noting that the speaker positions herself as the subject of this looking rather than the object, especially considering the intensity of the male gaze on websites like Chatroulette. The speaker goes on to acknowledge the duality of the act of looking that is occurring by referring to the website as a "two-way periscope."

Choi introduces the grotesque into the poem by referring to herself as a sort of monstrous not-quite-human not-quite-woman: "I wave back, nod, yes, I'm here, I'm real, / and shape myself a woman's shape, a girl's / live-action hologram projected on / their basement brains. My foul amygdala / Prince Thirstings, desperate congregations, pink / or blue-brown mammals begging for my face." These lines underscore both the performativity of the speaker's gender presentation and the almost repulsive strangeness of this interaction on both sides. Choi's speaker becomes a foul, freakish monarch or priest to a devoted and ravenous group of disciples. The

description of her audience as “pink / or blue-brown mammals” emphasizes how they are made animal by their desire for the speaker.

In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity,* Russo writes about how spectacle and the act of being looked at is central to the carnival grotesque, particularly the figure of the freak: “A spectacle, by definition, requires sight lines and distance. Audiences do not meet up face to face or mask to mask with the spectacle of freaks. Freaks are, by definition, apart, as beings to be viewed. In the traditional sideshow, they are often caged and most often they are silent while a barker narrates their exotic lives” (79-80). In this poem, Choi’s speaker is, in a sense, the caged freak being watched by an audience of horny men, but she asserts her agency by embracing the freakiness of her queer Asian female body and naming herself a deity in the final couplet of the opening sonnet: “Outside the frame, my eight eyes narrow. Yes. / I nod. Amen. I am your filthy god.” This image of the speaker’s eight eyes narrowing evokes a spider, but also calls to mind the racialized stereotype of the slant-eyed (East) Asian person whose eyes are a source of mockery and suspicion.

The freakish nature of Choi’s speaker’s body is inextricably tied to her racialized identity. In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1992), Susan Stewart writes about how the figure of the freak is a product of colonialism: “We find the freak inextricably tied to the cultural other--the Little Black Man, the Turkish horse, the Siamese twins…, the Irish giants...The body of the cultural other is by means of this metaphor both naturalized and domesticated in a process we might consider to be characteristic of colonization in general. For all colonization involves the taming of the beast by bestial methods and hence the conversion and projection of the animal and human, difference and identity” (109-110). While there are no explicit references to race in “Chatroulette,” it is impossible to separate Choi’s

depictions of the exaggerated, grotesque female body from its racialization, particularly within the context of the other poems in the collection.

The second sonnet in the crown embraces the grotesque even more fully than the first as the speaker describes what she will do to her "desperate congregation" of online onlookers: "I'll scrape the lonely from your teeth, / defuse the ticking marrow in your pit, / that clotted place your call a heart. I'll flash / a blood-sloshed smile and whisper, do you want / to marry it? To take me as your law? / I'll make you liquid men." In these lines, both the speaker and the men that she is addressing are depicted using grotesque, visceral, bloody language and imagery, creating a degree of equivalence between the two parties. While Choi's speaker is a deity to the men who beg for her image, she is also just as fleshy and raw as they are. Throughout the poem, and particularly in this second sonnet, the line breaks and enjambment serve to underscore the blurred lines between the eroticism and the violence of the interaction between the speaker and her audience: "I'll flash / a blood-sloshed smile," "I'll watch you eat / my image," "I choke / just like a girl, exactly like a girl / who's come to rot, to retch." Through enjambment, Choi subverts the expectations of a sexual performance, instead replacing it with acts of violence or consumption. This juxtaposition and lack of distinction between pleasure and displeasure is key to the grotesque and causes the reader to question the speaker's motivations and who really has the power in this interaction.

The next two sonnets in the crown further explore the speaker's body and her performance of girlhood, both within and outside of the context of Chatroulette. In these sections, the language and imagery becomes even more bodily, particularly focusing on imagery relating to mouths, consumption, and blood: "I gag on water. Yes, my blood eats air / and makes a mess beneath my skin," "They christen me with tongues against the class. / I drink and drink

their looking, til I'm soaked," "exactly like a girl / who's come to rot, to retch. To cough it up. / To drool mascara down her shaking chin." The mouth is an essential part of the grotesque body as a site of both pleasure and pain. Bakhtin writes: "Most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss" (317). As an open orifice, the mouth is the threshold between the body and the outer world, a liminal space. Bakhtin goes on to argue, "As we have said, the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon. The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. The outward and inner features are often merged into one" (318). In "Chatroulette," so much of the imagery is focused around the mouth, it's almost as though the speaker's body is reduced to a bloody, drooling, open mouth, performing to an audience of ravenous mouths desperate to consume.

The speaker's sense of self seems to deteriorate over the course of the poem, something that the speaker attempts to counteract through displaying herself online and interacting with others: "My image, / just an always-dying thing, asking its own / disgusting questions. Yes, I do have bones. / I gag on water. Yes, my blood eats air / and makes a mess beneath my skin. And what / do I consume? Whatever keeps me flesh. Tonight: a tide of faceless suplicants." The speaker's body appears to be hurtling towards entropy, towards inhumanity, and the only thing that will keep her human is to receive attention or validation from other people to prove that she is still real.

As the poem continues, the speaker describes her body with a series of metaphors equating her body with dirt and decay: "that's me, / oh god. A trough for ants. A dirty plate. / A

sour, yellow streak behind the fridge. / Chicken skin distending. Sweat spots. Milk." In contrast to the previous stanzas, which are syntactically varied and include longer sentences that stretch across lines ("I am the kind of girl who looks for men / to wipe away her face. I am the kind / of girl to peel her skin and show the work / of worms below"), these metaphors come one after the other in increasingly short and fragmented sentences, suggesting an almost manic state in the speaker's mind and body that culminates in a plea to either the reader, the men she is addressing online, or both: "Please, I didn't mean / to end this way -- a smear of gut and shell." By the final couplet of this penultimate sonnet, the speaker has been reduced to just "a smear of gut and shell," reminiscent of an egg fallen from a bird's nest, cracked and spilled onto the ground.

In the final sonnet of the crown, Choi takes this previous image further: "To end this way, a smear of gut and shell / against the bedroom wall, crushed by a thumb / belonging to a man, a swatting fan / in heat?" This image is a startlingly violent one, even more so than the volta of the preceding sonnet, as it introduces the figure of a nameless, faceless man's thumb crushing the speaker against a bedroom wall, an act that instantly calls to mind domestic violence. However, the poet instantly subverts the expectations created by this image by saying, "Don't worry. That's not how I go." Although this line occurs at the end of the first stanza and not in the final two lines of the poem as one would expect in a sonnet, I read it as one of the major voltas in this piece, a point where the speaker has been reduced to almost nothing but manages to regain control over the narrative. The speaker goes on to express further ambivalence as she states, "Look. Even when I wanted it, I didn't / always," and it's not clear what the "it" is referring to--perhaps her

Throughout this poem, the emotional tenor has been one of ambivalence--the reader is never certain who has the power and who, if anyone, is being harmed within the interactions

between the speaker and her audience. In this final sonnet, the speaker re-asserts her agency over her body: "It was the web I wanted all along: / A face to spin from air with spit and hands. / A sticky picture luring meals to leave / untouched. To be a girl untouched, alive, / who sees, and comes. Who brings herself online." The invocation of the web, of course, refers to the internet, but also calls back the image of the speaker's eight eyes narrowing in the final couplet of the first stanza. We see that the speaker has been weaving her web throughout this series of poems, and the reader has been caught in it as well.

As is typical of the sonnet crown, the final line of the final sonnet is nearly identical to the opening line of the first sonnet; however, by now the apparent simplicity of this statement has been deeply complicated. The addition of "To be a girl untouched, alive," raises the stakes of the opening statement. By describing herself as untouched and alive, the speaker conjures the specter of patriarchal violence that has haunted her throughout this sonnet crown. While she is untouched and alive for now, the reader is left with the feeling that the grotesque decay of the poem is still writhing beneath the surface, ready to burst forth at any moment.

IV. Open Up Your Lids and Howl: Kim Hyesoon's "Manhole Humanity"

Kim Hyesoon has been called one of the most influential contemporary South Korean poets, is the first female recipient of the prestigious Kim Su-yong and Midang awards, and is known for her experimental and grotesque work. In a 2012 interview with Kim in Guernica Magazine, poet and scholar Ruth Williams writes, "Kim Hyesoon's work functions like the body of a female grotesque; her poetry seeps from the page, protruding with images of violence, vomit, trash, bodily decay, and death. Kim's poems consistently resist the pressure to beautify; they take instead the subjects deemed appropriate to Korean women--family, motherhood,

romantic love--and defile them with the violent expressions of an oppressed identity." Kim's poems are surreal, unsentimental, unflinching, and utterly compelling. They are also undeniably grotesque: bodies in Kim's poems are full of holes that leak blood and bile; they stink and gush and bleed and birth. In the same interview, Kim explains how the experience of being a woman and a woman poet in a patriarchal society brought her to the grotesque:

> Women's language is the butcher's language who sells his or her body. It is grotesque and miserable. Female poets can finally step into the world of language after crossing this river of the grotesque; the words cannot gush out of their mouths until they cross the river of screams where you witness death like everyday affairs. I also came to grotesque language in the patriarchal culture under the dictatorship. The body that was broken into pieces is a sick body. I put the disease of this world and my sick body together. The grotesque in my poems is the motion I use to put myself and the grotesque world together. So the miserable images I use in my poems are the same as the letters I send into the miserable world.

In the foreword to Kim's book *All the Garbage of the World, Unite!* (Action Books 2011), translator Don Mee Choi (who is a formidable Korean-American poet in her own right) writes about an instance in which the editors of a U.S. literary journal were interested in publishing one of Kim's translated poems, but asked Choi to change the word "hole" to something less negative: "To change 'hole' to something else would mean changing the world 'A Hole' came from. During the Korean War (1950-53), about 250,000 pounds of napalm per day were dropped by the United States forces. Countless mountains, hills, rice fields, and houses were turned into holes. Four million perished, leaving more holes. It's a place that's positively holey. Kim Hyesoon's hole poem comes from there, and so do I" (xiii). The poems in this collection are haunted by holes: the holes of the human (female) body, holes in narratives and memory, and of course, the aforementioned holes of devastation inflicted upon the Korean

people by violent U.S. imperialism. In this essay, I will be examining what is perhaps the holiest poem in this collection, the epic 17-page-long closing poem "Manhole Humanity." While this poem is incredibly layered and fascinating and I could probably write a whole book discussing it, I will, for the sake of brevity, be forced to leave certain sections of it out of my close reading. I will, however, explore the poem's thematic concerns, language, imagery, and use of the grotesque.

"Manhole Humanity" is a sweeping exploration of the grotesque female body and the parallels between the trauma of imperialist violence and the trauma of patriarchy. It is made up of 30 sections, each demarcated by the letter/exclamation "O." The poem is mostly prosaic, almost entirely written in long paragraphs of unbroken text; however, certain sections do make use of line breaks. Still, even in these sections the lines are mostly end-stopped and only occasionally enjambed, which is why I will not spend very much time in this close reading talking about form. A prose poem is a poem that is not broken into lines of verse but still employs other poetic qualities such as metaphor, repetition, heightened imagery, fragmentation, or rhyme. As a hybrid form, the prose poem incorporates elements of both of its parent forms and disrupts the expectations of narrative, syntax, and characterization that one might have when reading a block of text that one assumes to be prose. By writing in mostly prose poem format, Kim's poem takes on an unfiltered, stream-of-consciousness quality, even though its language is carefully constructed.

Throughout "Manhole Humanity," Kim uses the grotesque to lay bare the brokenness of the postwar Korean landscape, women's bodies under the patriarchy, and religion. There is no singular narrative throughout this poem; rather, its logic is associative, surreal, and dreamlike. In Ruth Williams's article "'Female Poet' as Revolutionary Grotesque: Feminist Transgression in

the Poetry of Ch'oe Sung-ja, Kim Hyesoon, and Yi Yon-ju" in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* (2010), Williams explains how Kim uses the grotesque to uncover the dark side of domesticity and other social structures:

> Here, Kim expresses one of the core [tenets] of the poetics of the grotesque: there is power to be had in embracing a marginalized position. Though it may be a place of social exclusion, the margin is a space from which one can more easily do the work of transforming culture because it is there that one can more easily construct alternatives to the norm. Thus, Kim often uses the grotesque to deform institutions that patriarchal culture holds dear, offering an alternative view that undercuts these institutions' facade of power. In particular, many of Kim's poems deform the domestic landscape--conceived as the territory of women--into something horrific (407).

By creating a disorienting landscape in which both women's bodies and the nation-state are reduced to miserable, leaking holes, Kim reveals the inherent monstrosity of patriarchy and imperialism and de-normalizes their destructive effects.

In "Manhole Humanity," the most central image, figure, and motif in the poem is the hole. Holes play many roles and take many forms: manholes on the street, natural orifices (such as the mouth, nose, ears, anus, and vagina) in the speaker's body, holes inflicted upon bodies and landscapes through acts of violence, the hole as a mother, and even a Hole god. The hole, particularly as it manifests on and in the body, is one of the most important images to the grotesque: "The artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths" (Bakhtin 317-18). A grotesque body is one that is filled with holes, one that blurs the boundary between the self and the world. The hole is an embodiment of the very gendered cave of abjection written about by Russo; however, Kim takes the misogynistic view of the hole as a site of abjection and

turns it on its head. “Manhole Humanity” is positively teeming with holes, making it perhaps the most decadently grotesque poem in the whole collection.

The poem begins, “O / Goodness, I didn’t know there were such repulsive holes!” before launching into a sort of mini-ode to the speaker’s body in all its grotesque glory: “My hairy holes! / Creases of my stomach / Hair-like cilia in my nostrils / Finger-like villi in my small intestine / Pubic hair of love” (117). The descriptions of the speaker’s body are visceral and at times gross, but the tone is one of praise and adulation, almost like a sermon. The speaker elevates the minutiae of her intestines to an exalted status. The section ends with the rallying cry, “Holes of the world, open up your lids and howl!” (117). This is a call to action for the wounded and the wounds themselves, for everyone who has been reduced to nothing but holes to make their voices and their pain heard.

In the next section of the poem, the speaker enters a disorienting, absurd, and at times comical dreamscape where the reader is unsure of what is real and what isn’t. It begins within the speaker’s body, using matter-of-fact, prosaic language before quickly veering into the realm of fantasy: “O / Bile travels up the esophagus and collects in my mouth. My esophagus feels as if it’s burning...In my dream someone comes into my room to surf” (118). From there, the speaker’s perspective rapidly shifts between dreams: “In my dream I burn like a charcoal briquette, a wick placed down in my neck. In the next dream, I become a gas in the dream world of gases. I hear wind in my ears. / I dream of my holes falling onto a cement floor. I clean them up with a plastic brush” (118). This strange, unreal sequence of events sets the tone for the rest of the poem, which becomes increasingly fantastical and violent with the introduction of the figure of a doctor two stanzas later:

> Look over this way! As I open my eyes, the doctor
> pokes my tear glands with a long needle. Tears collect

> in my mouth. They're salty. I stare at the ocean inside
> me…
> My right shoulder hurts, but the doctor inserts a needle
> in my left toe. With a stick, the doctor explains the swirl
> of my holes and the structure of my spirals. Someone
> sticks his hand outside my manhole and looks out.
> Someone screams from my throat (118).

The language in this section is much stranger than the action that is taking place: one could imagine a doctor inserting a needle into their patient and explaining to them what is happening inside their body, but the line "With a stick, the doctor explains the swirl / of my holes and the structure of my spirals" is far more unusual and absurd. The figure of the doctor is not gendered, but the interaction between the doctor and the speaker clearly evokes patriarchal violence and the experience that many women share of being violated and invalidated by the medical system. The speaker's pain is ignored by the doctor, who instead inflicts more pain on her via the needles and explains her own body to her. It's also interesting to note that the someone is sticking his hand outside of the speaker's manhole rather than into it: the invading force is already inside of the speaker's body, almost a form of possession, which is further demonstrated by the figure screaming out of the speaker's throat. This act of possession of the speaker's body by an unwelcome male invader evokes a kind of sexual assault; however, it this invasion could also be representative of many forces that seek to possess the Korean woman speaker from the inside out: capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, racism, . Kim's speaker

In the following section, the poem again takes on a satirically sermonic tone as the speaker addresses the hole (which I read as not a specific hole in the speaker's body, but rather an archetypal Hole encompassing all holes) in a sort of devotional prayer: "Hole, the heart of all things. / Hole, my country, my matter, my toasty-warm god. / Hole, stay eternal! All things endure a life of nuisance through small uteruses then die for the sake of the eternal life of a big

uterus" (119). In contrast to the violent doctor of the previous section, Hole is a benevolent and miraculous god that offers safety and salvation. The speaker goes on to compare the Hole to Jesus Christ in mockery of a church sermon: "O / All together: Dear Hole has died / Dear Hole has resurrected / Dear Hole lives again" (120). By elevating the Hole, something so heavily associated with both the grotesque and the female, to the realm of the godly, Kim pokes fun at the absurdity of religious dogma and blurs the lines between the sacred and the profane.

Another major concern of both "Manhole Humanity" and the grotesque more broadly is the permeable boundary between life and death. Bakhtin writes, "One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born...From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other" (26). Again, Bakhtin does not go as far as to explicitly interrogate the gendered associations between the female (pregnant) body and the grotesque body, but in Kim's poem it is impossible to ignore. Not only is the Hole a god; it is also a mother:

> At the hospital across the street, a hole is giving birth to a hole.
> Please allow the safe delivery of a hole!
> As a mother hole of a mother hole prays rubbing her two palms
> together, a soprano climbs up an organ made of hospital drain-
> pipes in the delivery room, panting, then lets out a scream towards
> the sky. Dear Big Hole, please spit it out! This hole can't poss-
> ibly handle a newborn. Please spit it out, Dear Big Hole!...
> Another manhole humanity is born (120).

This absurd, chaotic scene combines three key features of the grotesque: pregnancy, orifices, and birth. Just a page later, a hole (perhaps the same hole or a different one entirely) dies: "O / At the intensive care unit, one floor below the gynecology ward, an electrical cord is plugged into a hole, a graph chart rotates waahwaah, the heart beats bambam, then later the hole dies" (121). Unlike the scene of the hole's birth, the death scene is treated with no (exaggerated or sincere)

sentimentality. Life and death are not miraculous or sacred within the landscape of "Manhole Humanity"; they are simply as absurd and disgusting as anything else.

There are several scenes in "Manhole Humanity" in which Kim uses the grotesque to subvert or mock Abrahamic religious practices, as in the prayer scenes earlier. While the majority of South Koreans do not identify as religious, Christianity is the most popular religion among those who are religious, and recent years have seen a dramatic rise in both numbers of Christians and religious tension. As a patriarchal religion that has led to the oppression and deaths of countless people, Kim treats Christianity with the same biting critique as she does patriarchy and imperialism. One such scene occurs on page 126, where there is a grotesque retelling of the story of Adam and Eve, a myth in which a woman is blamed for the entirety of the world's sins:

> One side of the first apple bursts and gets sucked through the lips of the naked first woman. The original woman's yellow teeth and smelly tongue begin to grind the apple into small bits. Cold wind, suns, apple blossoms, the gentle strokes of rain on my cheeks all get sucked into a wormhole. The apple doesn't know where it's going, but it follows the general theory of relativity and gets swept down a funnel. A legend spreads, that time-travel becomes possible if you go down the funnel. A legend spreads, that if you leave here and arrive in the distant past and kill the lethal snake, I will get to stay in the vast spaciousness, the time of being unborn.

The apple and the woman are both portrayed as decaying grotesques, dooming the world (and, inadvertently, the speaker) to a miserable existence. Throughout the poem, and particularly in this section, the tone modulates frequently, toeing the line between sincerity and parody, between horror and humor. The "I" enters this stanza abruptly, an intervention from the present into the past in an effort to prevent their own birth and suffering, but this attempt is futile. The section ends, "The hole secretes digestive juices and mixes them with whatever it sends down. After it

ingests the apple, the pitiful hole gulps for more towards the emptiness. It flails about like a snake that has fallen into the sea" (126). Here, the hole is an indifferent god that consumes everything around it. The hole/god is another oppressive force among many in the poem.

One of the most important and compelling sections of the poem is near the middle, where the speaker interrogates the "I" and the deterioration of her selfhood resulting from patriarchy and imperialism: "O / 'I' is a name for a place of confinement in my body! / 'I' is a name for all the things that don't appear outside the body's hole! / 'I' is a name for the lady and gentleman who don't recognize the person who lives in my body!" (129). Throughout the poem, the "I" of the speaker has been unstable and ambiguous at best, often shifting subjectivity. By this point in the poem, the speaker seems to embody a fragmented self in a period of ego death. The speaker goes on to say, "If the hole dies, 'I' die too." The hole and the speaker's self are, if not one, then at least inextricably linked. Again, this harkens back to Bakhtin's theory of the boundaryless grotesque in which he writes, "The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (Bakhtin 26). The speaker seems to be overtaken by holes, unable to escape:

> So 'I' is a name for a single ripple etched onto a lake.
> It's a name for a woman confined inside the hole's
> architecture. Therefore, once again I'm a hole. I 'do'
> hole. I'm someone who 'does' a hole voluntarily. All
> things are holes. All things 'do' holes. All things have
> just died, but the holes are alive. Holes will exist in the
> past and did exist in the future. I'm the hole's play-
> ground, I'm the hole's misery, I'm the hole's porter (129).

While the speaker claims that they are "doing" a hole voluntarily, it seems as though their fate as a hole in a holey landscape is inevitable. Even asserting their selfhood as an "I" is a futile endeavor, as the "I" only functions as a playground for holes.

While the violence of the Korean War is never explicitly alluded to in this poem, the effects of the war and other acts of violence and imperialism throughout Korean history are specters haunting the background of every scene. On page 130, Kim writes, “Beneath my hole, the graves are wide open like laughing mouths. / Here, noxious gas and filthy water flow. / I go into my body and suffocate. / If I go through the entire hole, I will fall into a grave.” Lurking just beneath the speaker’s body is an entrance to a mass grave, filthy and wretched and waiting to welcome the speaker into the abject fate of many who came before. While the poem does not specify whose bodies populate these graves, the image calls to mind the violence that befell the millions of Korean civilians killed, missing, or wounded during the Korean War or the brutal treatment of Korean laborers and so-called “comfort women” under Japanese occupation. These lines call attention to the fact that every hole may also double as a grave holding the bodies of nameless victims of imperial and patriarchal violence.

Towards the end of the poem, the tone becomes a little bit more hopeful as the speaker’s hole begins to sing, soon recruiting other holes into its choir: “The night when my hole howls at the moon, I hold onto it and fall asleep listening to its song. / When my hole sings the song in my knees, in my lymph nodes, in my pelvis, in my groin, in my throat, in my nostrils, in my ears, the hole of the continent over there replies” (132). Throughout this poem, Kim has created a landscape and a logic that is confusing, alienating, and sometimes even disturbing. While at the start of the poem, the speaker appeared to praise the Hole as a god, by this point they seem to be overwhelmed and filled with a sense of futility, having lost any sense of self outside of the Hole. However, when the speaker’s hole begins to sing, we see the first real glimpse of hope and connection in the poem. The speaker continues, “Music begins as I take off the hole. The imprisoned music unwinds the silk from its cocoon. The music traveling through the veins flows

out at the end of the pen" (133). This is the first time in the poem that the speaker has referenced the act of creative writing, and this act seems to be the speaker's salvation from holey abjection.

In the next paragraph/stanza, the speaker experiences a sort of death and rebirth, or at the very least, an intense catharsis: "The dark lonely holes that my life has passed through begin to spew out candle drippings. Flame begins to flare up from the peak of the hole, which I refer to as this moment. Now at this moment fire gets kindled in the pit of the mound of my body, and the flames flare up along with the endless rapid currents of extinction" (133). Even as the speaker describes their own spectacular immolation as it is taking place, they do so with a matter-of-fact, almost detached tone that is jarring to read. The speaker doesn't dwell at all on their own bodily sensations or emotions, indicative of the speaker's intense detachment and dissociation from their body. At last, the speaker appears to fully succumb to the hole through its song: "When I go over the hole's climax the song of a song, the shout of a shout flow out by themselves. All the holes of my body, cry! Blood vessels burn till they turn white, my throat burns till it turns white. / A song flies up outside the hole. / The lids of manholes float in the air for a brief moment like graduation caps" (133). The simile that closes this section is one of the few similes in the poem; most of the figurative language is difficult to identify as metaphor due to its surrealism. This lone simile is haunting in its simplicity; the image of the manhole lids lingering in the air in celebration is both liberating and eerie.

The final two sections of the poem read like a denouement after the climax in the previous section. The speaker emerges, seemingly more confident in asserting their identity as an "I," though still deeply intertwined with their hole. They dance in a nearly religious fervor:

> O
> Dance is the sadness called upon by the music of my hole.
> Dance is the cry that is called upon by the music rising up
> through my hole.

> I dance like a pair of starved pink shoes that show up after
> midnight in the street.
> I have come out of the hole, but my body is wearing a hole,
> the hole endlessly proliferates!
> I must dance all the mazes.
> I need to dance till the hole becomes sublime (134).

The speaker dances, their hole dances, even the flames and ash that burned them previously dance, in an apparent ritual to make the hole sublime. Since the hole has been treated as something divine from the very beginning of the poem, it's unclear how dancing will make the hole any more sublime than it already is, but it's clear that the speaker believes that this act is necessary. The speaker's hole transcends the speaker's body: "When I lift up my lowly hole towards the sky, the golden spacecraft takes off from the hole. / The hole is emitted nonstop to the outside" (134). This ecstatic scene quickly shifts tone as the speaker is left dejected without the hole, their god and parasite: "The birds in my sleeves die. The sand mandala crumbles under the broom. / The coldcold charcoal, the night of the black shield rushes in" (135). Though the hole's ascension was something that the speaker desperately wanted and worked for, once it occurs, they are left with nothing but the cold aftermath.

In contrast to the extravagant, magnificent display of the penultimate section, the final stanza of this poem is almost demure, made up of only seven lines and taking place in a single contained scene that describes a tunnel made of waves in the ocean in Hawaii that crashes, turning the sea inside out. In the final couplet of "Manhole Humanity," the speaker marvels, "The blue tunnel opens, yet crumbles! / One rolled up hole roams in the deep wave" (135). Though narratively disconnected from the sections that came before, this scene is a stunning distillation of the many forms and functions of the hole over the course of this poem. Here, there is no sign of the grotesque; the hole is simply a beautiful occurrence of nature, only a god in the way that all of nature is.

"Manhole Humanity" is an epic poem with all the grandeur and weight of "Howl" or "The Odyssey," but with far more holes and grotesquerie. Ruth Williams writes, "If those who are marginalized by society seize the power to defile, the normal order of things will be reversed and 'dead things' will rise up...In Kim's poem, exposing one's monstrous nature is a gesture of revolution" (Williams 408). Kim's voice speaks for the marginalized and all of those forgotten by those in power; it is a call for all the "dead things" to arise and be heard. By employing the grotesque in her poems, Kim uncovers the disturbing and disgusting qualities of society that we are conditioned to see as normal.

V. Conclusion: Hole, the Heart of All Things

I spent almost all of the year 2020 quarantined alone in a one-bedroom apartment, growing sick of myself and withering away from lack of intimacy as I finished the first year of my MFA program and began the second on Zoom. Everything in my life changed--my routines, my relationships, my body--and as a severe creature of habit, I did not know how to cope. Away from the light of my friends' love, I forgot how to see myself as anything other than monstrous. I avoided mirrors, avoided phone calls, avoided the page.

Throughout all of this, it was poetry that helped me claw my way out of the burning dumpster of my depression and back towards the light. More specifically, it was the poetry of Kim Hyesoon, Kim Yideum, Franny Choi, Leila Chatti, Jenny Zhang, and Aria Aber that brought me back to myself when it felt like nothing else could. Their poems were gorgeous and technically skillful, but also gross and disturbing. In a time when it seemed as though everyone around me was desperate to "get back to normal," their use of the grotesque reminded me that

yes, this world is fucked up and ugly and we must never grow numb to it. Normalcy is its own kind of violence.

What if we allow ourselves to truly see and revel in the world's ugliness and our own monstrosity? What if we, the marginalized and oppressed, bellowed our rage into the air so loudly and discordantly that none of the ruling class could ever sleep soundly again?

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