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Title

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0hb42816>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 10(2)

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Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.5070/T8102045732

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The Familial Grotesque in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Poetry

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A trope frequently appearing in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's writings is the traditional, nuclear family. Often evoked as a site of conflict, this model of the family is enlisted in her fiction and poetry to implicate and explore questions of gender, class, and identity, among others. Unsurprisingly, the family is hence rarely affirmative, but a representation usually associated with repression, unbelonging, and embroilment for its members, especially the womenfolk. In the case of Lim's fiction, take for example the short story, "Mr Tang's Girls" (1981), in which the adolescent female protagonist's restricted sense of self stems precisely from her father's refusal to acknowledge her maturing womanhood, which he interprets as rebellion and disrespect for him instead.¹ As a result, she is not only tacitly shunned by the rest of her family, but subsequently punished with an arranged marriage. Family persecution is prominent in "Thirst" (1985), although the target here is the father figure, thereby acknowledging that men can be victims of their own family's machinations, too. In the story, James's ostracism from his wife and daughters would eventually drive him to desperation that culminates in the shameful act of adultery with his gardener's daughter.² Then there is "The Good Old Days" (1981), which depicts how greed, backstabbing and rivalry amongst family members eventually lead to litigation over the patriarch's considerable will in the end. In this regard, the title is not only invariably ironic, but also intimates the familiarity of such a scenario that it is considered "good old days" by the narrator's mother.³ Explored in "All My Uncles" (1978), on the other hand, is the lasting impact of family breakup on children that sets in motion their lifelong cycle of self-destructive pursuits. Indeed, Lim's fiction consistently demonstrates the extent of the family's negative determinism on subjectivity.⁴ The disruptive effects it asserts are both deep and enduring. Tellingly, of the various households featured in Lim's narratives, only Li An's in *Joss and Gold* (2001), expresses a setting that is palpably harmonious and nurturing due to its all-female and hence non-traditional structure.⁵

A similar sensibility regarding the family is also apparent in Lim's poetry, although here the trope is usually expressed in the form of single family members (e.g., the father figure, the maternal figure, the grandmother figure) to effect a detailed character study of each. What is especially notable for me amongst her poems featuring the family, however, is a small constellation of verses whose tendency is to associate the trope with grotesque imagery. Admittedly few in quantity, these poems nevertheless warrant critical attention for the entrenched gender critical and cultural implications they illuminate precisely as a result of enlisting the grotesque. As such, the aim of this article is to analyze how the grotesque is used as a rhetorical strategy in Lim's poems featuring the family (or more accurately, its individual members) to potentially underscore feminist persuasions. For my purpose, I will mainly discuss selections from *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (1998) due to its considerable number of poems implicating the family with grotesquerie, although poems from her earlier collection, *Monsoon History* (1994), will also be considered.⁶ Organized into four sections following this introduction, the first necessarily defines the grotesque and clarifies its complication as a cultural symbol due to its signification of excess transgression and ambiguity. To help explain the various points concerning the concept proffered by theorists like Justin Edwards, Rune Graulund, and Thomas Weiskel (among others), I will enlist the poem, "Ah Mah," to serve as illustration, thus facilitating a discussion that concurrently takes into account Lim's texts at the same time.⁷ Having established the critical contours of the grotesque, the next section will specifically explore the various rhetorical strategies Lim engages in her poems to represent the family in grotesque terms, and the ideological significance it likely engenders. As my reading will reveal, the function of the grotesque in poems about the maternal figure is distinctively different from those whose subject it is not, which then provides the context for my argument in the last two sections of this essay. Accordingly, inferring from this dissimilarity in function is the concept's signification of instability that, on the one hand prescribes to the grotesque the role of the resistive, indomitable, and empowering agent claimed by feminist scholars like Mary Russo and Margaret Miles to champion and celebrate the female body and self, while on the other hand, directing it towards reinforcing the patriarchal status quo, thus negating the feminist perspective it allegedly provokes. To understand how these two positions regarding the grotesque are expressed in Lim's poetry, they will be investigated separately in section three and the essay's conclusion respectively.

A couple of important points before I proceed: First, it must be stressed that Lim's poetry rarely represents the grotesque as literal, although there are some examples where the image is undoubtedly embodied. That is, the grotesque is usually figuratively imposed on the family to elicit contrasting interpretations of the trope's ideological assertions. Second, while Lim's poems often incline towards autobiography, they will not be subjected to intense biographical criticism in this essay. In this regard, while I acknowledge the intersection between Lim's creative writing and her biography (since this is also undeniable, given her confession in an interview about

her work's self-referential nature),⁸ my position here is that her investment of the family trope with grotesque connotations is primarily motivated by aesthetics and not personal sentiments about her own relatives.

Situating the Grotesque in Shirley Lim's Poetry

As mentioned, by way of introducing the grotesque, I will focus my discussion in this section on a single poem by Lim whose subject palpably reflects qualities associated with the aesthetic concept. Titled "Ah Mah," which is a Chinese appellation for grandmother, the poem is written in a series of eight tercets and a final quatrain that reads like a catalogue of the subject's unusual physical characteristics.⁹ The first stanza, for example, already indicates her curious embodiment of a contradiction: an elderly woman who "was smaller" than the persona at eight, leading her to wonder if Grandmother had "been child forever?" Stanza two then goes on to describe Grandmother's face, whose "chin [is] sharp as a knuckle" and resembles, on the whole, a "fan ... / hardly half-opened, not a scrap / of fat anywhere," thereby intimating not only a doll-like visage, but inscrutability as well. To get around, stanza three tells the reader, Grandmother:

... lean[s] on
handmaids, on two tortured

fins ... (13)

While the parallel structure in the two clauses ("... on ...") suggests that "handmaids" and "two tortured fins" are one and the same, I am more inclined to read the latter as referring to Grandmother's arms, because it seems more plausible; that is, and again like a child, Grandmother is supported by handmaids as she goes about her routines. In this regard, "fins" will hence figuratively underscore the uselessness of her appendages—a point arguably reinforced by the word's position as an enjambment that also begins the next stanza, as if to suggest Grandmother's disassociation from her arms. However, of the various curious features she exhibits, it is her feet that are undoubtedly the most conspicuous because:

Every bone in [them]
had been broken
bound tighter than any neighbor's sweet

daughter's. Ten toes and instep
curled under, yellow petals
of chrysanthemum, wrapped

by gold cloth (13)

There is no mistaking the lines' allusion to foot-binding, a custom practiced in China since the tenth century and banned only in the early twentieth century, that served as the benchmark for a woman's beauty and desirability, which, in turn, determined her social status. That Grandmother's feet were bound "tighter than any neighbor's sweet / daughter's" in this regard would be indicative of her (feet's) superlative grade, which the poem confirms in stanza four, when she was bought as a child bride by a wealthy sixty-year-old man. Notably, as the rest of the poem seems to stress, what is deemed precious by him is not the girl, but her feet, which he swore "he'd not dress with sarong / of maternity" but would wrap in "gold cloth" to be "held ... in his palms" every night (14).

More important to my present inquiry is how Grandmother's description in "Ah Mah" recalls characteristics associated with the grotesque. To explain, I must first introduce the concept and outline its complexity as a cultural symbol that is simultaneously arresting and disquieting. As an aesthetic category, the grotesque is difficult to determine, because it embodies, what Philip Thomson calls "*the unresolved clash of incompatibilities,*" and hence ambiguity.¹⁰ Geoffrey Galt Harpham further contends that while grotesqueries inevitably "require" definition, they fundamentally "defeat" such an attempt because:

[T]hey are neither so regular nor rhythmical that they settle easily into our categories, nor so unprecedented that we do not recognize them at all. They stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world.¹¹

Yet it is also for this reason that the grotesque "offers a creative force for conceptualizing the indeterminate that is produced by distortion, and reflecting on the significance of the uncertainty that is thereby produced."¹² As an expression of the indeterminate in literature and art, the grotesque directly defies an attempt to fix, and thereby control, its meaning, and in the process exposes the faultlines of our ideological persuasions and the permeability of their borders. Not surprisingly, scholars have compared the grotesque with the Kristevan abject, since both are linked to the body in a way that also places its determination under erasure. Like the abject, the grotesque can occupy the position of "both subject and object, both parts of our bodies and not our own body—that most familiar and subjective of all objects ... but also all that we are not in all that we discard, 'abject' body fluids like piss, shit, and vomit, that 'signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not.'"¹³ As such, the grotesque subsists on the threshold as a "self-abolishing incongruity" that confuses distinctions, disrespects boundaries, and rejects binary logic.¹⁴ Concurrently

belonging and not belonging, the grotesque thereby threatens our sense of order and subjectivity with the possibility of their destabilization and even dissolution.

Alternatively, the grotesque can be construed as a variation of the sublime, which, according to Thomas Weiskel, “abridge[s], reduce[s], and parodie[s]” the latter, while “somehow [being] hedged with irony.”¹⁵ Without questioning the veracity of Weiskel’s observation, I highlight its attention to a characteristic shared by the two concepts instead.¹⁶ Just as the sublime engenders “a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude ... ,” the grotesque also effects a similar experience, resulting from the imagination’s inability to aesthetically comprehend images representing incongruity and ambiguity.¹⁷ That the grotesque is often ascribed terms like “bizarre,” “weird,” and “freakish” indubitably attests to this failure of the aesthetic imagination and its tendency to dismiss what it cannot appreciate. And if, as Weiskel implies, the grotesque is less potent, and hence less threatening, than the sublime, it is only because the unsettling incongruity it expresses is also tinged with irony and mirth. The grotesque, in other words, is also a comic figure whose instigation of laughter mitigates the disquiet it casts over its audience. This quality would further explain why it is that the sublime inspires awe while the grotesque mainly encourages contempt.

The observations concerning the grotesque’s integral qualities and the effect it induces in its audience would inevitably beg the question of what qualifies as grotesque. For answers, scholars have turned to the visual arts, which offer a visceral delineation of the concept but whose wide-ranging examples also demonstrate just how prevalent and polymorphous the grotesque is in aesthetic history.¹⁸ Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund, for example, posit that grotesque embodiments are:

at times, incomplete, lacking in vital parts, as they sometimes have pieces cut out of them: limbs are missing, to be replaced sometimes by phantom limbs, and bodily mutations become dominant traits. In some cases, grotesque figures combine human, non-human, animal In other cases, the corporeal deformity consists of extra body parts.¹⁹

In other words, any physical change experienced by the body can potentially transform it into the grotesque, whether it is caused by mutation, subtraction (e.g., amputation) or addition (prosthetics). Alternatively, the grotesque can also be engendered by fusing distinct embodiments, such as unrelated species, into a single entity, as evident in the many enduring creatures of mythology, like the mermaid, the werewolf, and the *jorōgumo* (Japanese spider demon), to name just three examples—all of which are hybrids interfacing human and animal. When reading Edwards and Graulund’s description against the subject in “Ah Mah,” to return to Lim’s poem, we can observe Grandmother’s alignment with the grotesque body in at least three ways. The first is

her unnaturally small stature that simultaneously situates her as old and young, thereby underscoring her physicality with irony and a touch of the absurd. Second, while the image of her arms as fins is only figurative, it nevertheless explains her appearance, at least to the protagonist, resembling a human/fish hybrid, which only adds to the oddness of her body. Third, and most distinctive, are her disfigured feet that paradoxically represent her incomparable appeal, thus collapsing what are otherwise incompatible notions (beauty and ugliness) into each other. In each case, Grandmother patently expresses qualities both instigating and repelling the gaze that directly equate her with grotesquerie signification.

In the final analysis, however, that an object can acquire grotesquerie, as Bernard McElroy notes, is because the world in which the object is situated is itself grotesque in the first place.²⁰ Accordingly, if the grotesque is produced by the symbolic order it threatens, it is perhaps because the latter desires to maintain misrecognition of its own grotesquerie. In this regard this is how the grotesque can be enlisted to illuminate ideological undercurrents in art and “[yield] a comprehension of society and culture not otherwise possible.”²¹ Read in this perspective, Grandmother's grotesque body in Lim's poem is arguably intended to expose, as the true grotesque, the patriarchal body politic premised on Confucian belief that discriminates against women. After all, what can be more grotesque than a symbolic order that demands the mutilation of women by disguising it as tradition? Indeed, perhaps the most grotesque image of all in the poem is the image described in the final lines, of an elderly man holding a girl's malformed feet as he experiences what is akin to ecstasy (implied by the word “fever”). Read as a metaphor, this undoubtedly unsettling image illustrates the extent of Chinese patriarchy's blindness to its own perversion, so much so, that it can no longer differentiate purity from corruption, part from whole, and by extension, recognize its own grotesquerie.

Family Portraits

Analogously speaking, reading *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* is tantamount to viewing a family photo album. But as the poem discussed above tacitly demonstrates, instead of photographic verisimilitude, these photos rather display caricatures that inevitably deemphasize their subjects' humanness. Instead, particular physical features are given prominence to effect irony, parody, and/or mockery of the subjects. Caricatures, as Margaret Miles notes, are, of course, one of the “rhetorical and pictorial devices” employed by art to implicate the grotesque by “isolat[ing] and fetish[izing] parts of the body.”²² This is precisely the strategy deployed in “Ah Mah” to render its subject absurd and unsettling by gradually focusing on her feet and then maintaining that focus for more than half the poem. But Lim's poem goes a step further by intimating this isolating strategy on a *formal* level as well. The position of the word “fins” as enjambment, discussed earlier, is an example of how the poem insulates a word for emphasis and to potentially startle the reader with its strangeness. In fact,

that the text frequently uses enjambments to break stanzas into unnatural-sounding lines could be interpreted as a complementary relationship between form and content to ensure the establishment of caricature is not missed. But as we shall see later, caricature can be achieved by sequestering not only body parts, but intangible qualities specific to the subject as well.

Besides caricature, inversion and hybridization are two other methods expressing grotesquerie in art that Miles identifies that are also apparent in Lim's verses and in certain cases, even used to trigger caricature. The former, Miles explains, reverses what is otherwise an "expected and pleasing appearance to produce a disturbingly inverted image" (100). Grandmother's smallness resembling a child's physique in "Ah Mah" can be read as an instance of inversion that transforms her into an embodiment "titillating its readers with weirdness" (85). What Miles means by "appearance" refers mainly to visual images, but could be extended to include ideas as well, i.e., the reversal of what is otherwise a familiar and affirmative idea to produce its antithesis. Such is the strategy that activates the grotesque in the poem "Father from Asia," whose subject, unlike in "Ah Mah" and other verses featuring the family, is foremost symbolic.²³ What is obvious in the poem is the dread and contempt engendered in the persona by this father, whom she variously labels "dangerous," "father of poverty ... / of ten children ... / of nothing, / from whose life / I have learned nothing for myself ... of [her] childhood ... [and] of sacrifice."²⁴ To escape him, the persona continues, she must:

... renounce you, keep you in my sleep,
keep you two oceans away. (23)

What, however, transforms the image of a tyrannical father to one who is also grotesque, are the final five lines, which describe him as

... Ghost
Who eats his own children, father
Who lives at the center of the world,
Whose life I dare not remember.
For memory is a wheel that crushes
and Asia is dust, is dust. (23)

Possibly alluding to Cronus, the Titan god who consumed his children in Greek mythology, the father figure in Lim's poem is unmistakably an inversion of what a father/fatherhood should be. In his act of ingesting, rather than procreating children, he becomes the grotesque antifather whose crushing memory compels the persona to relocate herself not one, but "two oceans away" (23). And like Cronus, who symbolizes a patriarchy that destroys rather than nurtures, this Father from Asia is also an euphemism for traditional patriarchy that is threatened by its children and desires

their subjugation (keeping them poor, teaching them nothing) in order to thrive. Unlike the Titan however, Lim's antifather figure appears indestructible and only by breaking away from him can the persona attain a favorable future.²⁵ More directly than in "Ah Mah," the ascription of grotesquerie to the paternal figure in "Father from Asia" is clearly meant to figuratively underline the profundity of a perverse symbolic order whose oppressive ideology to destroy, rather than empower, its children also makes it increasingly outmoded.

The third approach for conscripting the grotesque in art, hybridization, reiterates Thomson's point regarding the concept as a clash of incompatible states, whereby the hybridized product continues to retain characteristics of its prototypes without consolidating them. Or to quote Stallybrass and White, the grotesque is that which emerges as a "boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which the self and the other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone"—"dangerously unstable" because its incongruity threatens the aesthetic impulse to separate things into distinct categories.²⁶ Notably enough, a rhetorical device whose broad function is to hybridize unrelated entities or elements is the metaphor. Although often considered a mode for comparison, the metaphor operates, in truth, on the principle of imposing one object/idea onto another, in order to underscore a certain quality in the latter. In this regard, the metaphor is more than just a comparative device (such as a simile), and can also be regarded as the rhetorical fusion of two objects/ideas into a new one that nevertheless retains its originals' distinctiveness. Thus, describing a woman as a rabbit would indicate her timidity by rhetorically grafting onto the human the signifier of an animal without negating either signifier at the same time. Fusion without consolidation, as such, is the principle on which the metaphor works. That we do not apprehend a metaphor's incongruity is again likely due to our aesthetic imagination's failure (or disinclination) to pursue the image it signifies to its logical end.

Metaphors, however, acquire heightened prominence in verse, because the hybridization they effect is often extended. For this reason, an image motivated by an extended metaphor can acquire compelling characteristics because the incongruity it inspires becomes conspicuous. That the pigs in Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) are undeniably grotesque is due, in part, to the novel's premise as an allegory, and hence an extended metaphor. Returning to Lim's texts, we can observe how this rhetorical device of hybridizing distinct objects/ideas to intimate grotesquerie is apparent in the poem "Mother wasn't," whose subject, as with Lim's other poems discussed so far, corresponds with the title.²⁷ The following lines describing the mother figure are from stanza three:

My mother is sleeping.
For once she isn't gazing at me.
Her chubby unhealthy cheeks glow
with a greed for life.

Her little nose snores like
 a piglet after its first milk meal.
 I watch my mother sleeping
 at the teat of the full world
 she has always wanted.
 Her hair is thin; pale bald patches
 glisten like an older man ...

That the subject here (and elsewhere, as will be demonstrated later) refers to Lim's own mother is undeniable, based on what the poet tells us in her award-winning memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996).²⁸ But even without recourse to the poet's biography, it is clear from the rest of the poem that the mother's abandonment of the family to escape poverty, when the persona was merely a child, would precipitate in the latter a lifelong aversion towards the former. Evident in the lines above is the rhetorical hybridization that combines the mother figure and a piglet in an incarnation of indulgence, hence inviting the persona's disdain. With each line emphasizing characteristics like laziness ("sleeping" is mentioned twice), sedentariness (thus her "unhealthy" constitution), and self-satisfaction ("sleeping at the teat"), and describing her as "chubby" and with "hair [that] is thin; pale bald patches," the stanza gradually transforms the mother figure into a configuration more reflective of beast than human. Adding to the mother figure's hybridization is her infantilization (as "piglet") and defeminization (her balding likens her to an "old man"), both of which further amplify her image's inclination towards grotesquerie. In her uninhibited and selfish desire for material wellbeing, the mother figure becomes an embodiment of the excessive and the unnatural, and in this regard, she is not merely *like* a piglet, *but is one* in the persona's perspective. Incidentally, the attribution of an image of grotesque self-indulgence to the maternal figure can also be inferred from an earlier poem by Lim. Although less direct, it is possible to surmise from the first stanza of "Mother" that this extended metaphor also hints at a piglet:

Mother is toothless, sag-skinned,
 Coconut round and brown with scar.
 ...
 Sarong knotted modestly,
 Fell into the sea, milk fleshed young,
 Ungainly now, unstrung,
 She cannot stand heat, lies snoring
 Under circling breezes.²⁹

Just as with “My mother wasn’t,” the image represented in “Mother” seems to both infantilize her and compromise her humanness with qualities suggestive of a suckling piglet, which, when read in light of the former poem, becomes unmistakable. And again, as in the earlier poem, the mother figure is not merely compared to what is allegedly a piglet, but is rhetorically transformed into a human–animal hybrid, when considering the opening line’s declarative statement, “Mother is ...”.

As grotesque engendered by the rhetorical hybridization of a human subject with an animal traditionally associated with idleness, indulgence, and voracity, the mother figures in the poems are invariably invested at the same time with irony and parody, qualities that Weiskel contends are integral to the concept. Underscoring the poem’s irony is the mother’s desire to escape a potentially dehumanizing situation (poverty) that has instead compromised her humanness, while her attempt to epitomize a woman of means — which instead makes her absurd and contemptible— informs the parody. In this way, the maternal figure is also caricatured, thus reinforcing her grotesque proclivity and warranting the critique concerning how hybridization can sometimes generate caricatures to capture the grotesque. Additionally, what motivates the caricaturing of the mother figure in the two poems is not a body part but an abstract quality specific to the subject (i.e., her rapacity) that is isolated for emphasis via the hybridization of the mother’s image with that of a piglet.

This metaphoric conflation somewhat echoes Rune Graulund’s postulation that it is not only bodily aberrations that can acquire grotesque significance, but aberrations in behavior and attitudes as well. In his article discussing the link between sophistication and grotesquerie, Graulund contends that while the two categories are often considered diametrically opposed, they actually belong to a single continuum and as such would invariably intersect at certain points and thus assume each other’s position; i.e., “sophistication ... turn[ing] grotesque and vice versa.”³⁰ Graulund identifies decadence as an example of sophistication that has turned unnatural as a result of excess. As he explains, decadence “is a sophisticated ‘form of self-indulgence’ expressed through an excessive and highly conscious intake of ‘luxurious material consumption’ of the most refined kind, but also of sometimes vulgar, even repulsive, material and manners transforming into the very opposite through conscious and excessive expenditure.”³¹ Notable are the words Graulund uses to describe decadence (excessive, vulgar, repulsive) that both transform it into a parody of sophistication and unmistakably recall the grotesque as well, thus establishing the premise of his argument. Equally important is Graulund’s observation of decadence as a conscious performance, whether or not parody is intended. For an embodiment of decadence, Graulund turns to the dandies populating the short stories of nineteenth-century American writer, H. H. Munro (Saki, 1870–1916) whose excessive display of alleged refinement inevitably turns them into caricatures, and hence the grotesque double, of the sophisticated individual (347–48).³²

Caricature that isolates an abstract trait to foreground grotesquerie can be inferred from one final example in Lim’s *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* whose

subject, perhaps unsurprisingly, is again the maternal figure. In “Mother’s Shoes,” the maternal figure’s footwear is ultimately rejected by the persona to symbolize her rejection of the former’s values, which like those of the mothers in the earlier poems discussed, are primarily driven by excessive material desire.³³ Represented as the consumer *par excellence* in the text, the mother is at once an embodiment of extravagance who seeks out:

... fine things, confused
 life with wanting, carried in
 from the P & O steamboats smoking
 off Malacca godowns. No Asian
 bazaar, but the latest
 Western fashions: Elizabeth Arden,
 Max Factor, Jantzen, Christian Dior.
 She wanted dollars repeating
 in a dozen furnished rooms. Limos
 of German muscle, triple-spray—
 painted, airconditioned, leather
 upholstery, permanent, sealed—
 in-plastic: one for her, one for me,
 and one for show
 Mother was a forward-looking
 lady, wanted a good perm, curls
 like the British mems buying
 at Cold Storage. She didn’t know
 what her hair looked like until
 it began to fall out. (8)

In relentlessly purchasing expensive goods, the mother figure patently displays a lack of both discernment and restraint in her pursuit. As with the display of decadence by Saki’s dandies, this extravagance constitutes excessive performance. Indeed, the use of run-on lines to list various brand names and luxury items arguably suggests the intensity of her acquisition, so much so, that the persona is struggling to keep up. That she would want three of the same object testifies, moreover, to her overindulgence and voracity, whereby her desire for material things appears limitless. Far from typifying a woman of refined taste, mother is instead a caricature and grotesque double whose uninhibited consumerism reduces her to comic absurdity, as implied in the last three lines quoted above.

The Grotesque as Agent of Subversion

Two observations can be derived from the discussion in the previous section. First, in Lim’s poems featuring the family, images of the grotesque are associated almost

exclusively with women. Although the male figure in “Father from Asia” is invested with this quality, he is evidently a symbol without allusion to an actual embodied subject. Conceivably motivated by Lim’s own personal experiences in this case as well, her verses palpably treat the paternal figure with greater sympathy when compared to the maternal one, which is often illustrated derisively, or in the case of “Ah Mah,” almost with detachment. Poems like “Ballad of the father,” “Father in China,” “Black and white,” “My Father,” and “My Father’s Sadness,” consistently depict the paternal figure (who conspicuously references Lim’s own father) in nostalgic terms—someone not perfect but whose (quoting from “Ballad of the father”):

Struggle and love,
peel[ed] him to his core
to a dumbness stuck,
final and poor. (18)³⁴

Indeed, the declaration of “affection” for the father figure in “Black and white” and the memory of a man who

had wanted
Everything, if he could afford it,
To make [the persona] happy (23)

in “My Father” are a stark contrast to how the mother figure is portrayed: “cursed” and unforgivable (“My mother wasn’t”), “stuffed full of / ancestors, recessive genes” (“Mother’s Shoes”), and hateful to the persona (“The double”), although the mother figure in the latter case is admittedly only inferred from the title (i.e., the persona’s “other”) and her materialism, causing her to “forg[e]t her child.”³⁵ More importantly, in none of the poems about the father is he attributed with characteristics corresponding with the grotesque. But the poem that perhaps illustrates this juxtaposition between parental figures best is “Watching,” in which the persona witnesses a domestic altercation between her parents that culminates in physical violence leading to her mother’s abuse.³⁶ Tellingly, despite what is transpiring before the persona, her feeling about the mother’s victim status arguably remains ambivalent, based on how the couple is described. While he is “angry, blazing, a mean fire,” and so overcome with frustrated laughter that he “raises his fist” and “Draws blood,” the mother, on the other hand, is “not screaming ... / fat muscle ugly / ... a common stone [who] hates this man,” a “stone fired hard” and finally, “a stone drawn in blood,” all of which not only invests in her a quality of hardness (i. e., she is heartless, stubborn), but also figuratively (or rhetorically) hybridizes her into a configuration of incompatible states—of unsightly (“ugly”) flesh and stone.³⁷ Following this, it is arguable that from the persona’s viewpoint then, what the father strikes is not the mother, but a grotesque version of her, whose inhumanness somehow makes her

impervious to bruising. In the aftermath of the conflict, the persona sees “Mother dead, father dead,” which for me is more likely symbolic, with “dead” meaning different things for each parent: for the father, to be dead suggests the idea of being spent, like a fire that has been put out if continuing from the metaphor of him as a “blazing ... mean fire”; the implication for the mother, on the other hand, is that her grotesque transformation has made her henceforth unrecognizable, and hence “dead,” to the persona.

Related to the first observation is a second, which has to do with the appropriation of the grotesque for feminist concerns. Scholars like Mary Russo and Margaret Miles have observed how in the visual and literary arts women, or more accurately, their bodies, have been especially susceptible to grotesque representations due to their historical “association with ... materiality, sexuality and reproduction.”³⁸ According to Miles, the untamable, “penetrable [and] permeable” female body that “produces juices and smells” and is “shaped by lust” which no amount of “careful self-scrutiny and male surveillance” can curb patently aligns it with “an irreducible element of monstrosity” informing its grotesquerie (92). As if echoing Miles, Russo demonstrates how the relationship between women and “curiosities and freaks”—terms she uses interchangeably with the grotesque—can be observed in “conditions and attributes” linked to the female body, among them being “illness, aging, reproduction, non-reproduction, secretion, lumps, bloating, wigs, scars, make-up and prostheses,” all of which render women variously undesirable, insidious, immoderate (or excessive), comical, unnatural, obscene, and not quite human.³⁹ For Russo, however, whose work draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, the female grotesque can be a particularly powerful feminist motif because it denotes a state of flux, which makes it elusive to and inapprehensible by the status quo, and hence represents the overturning of hierarchies and the negation of monolithic officialdom that complements the “[c]lassical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism” (63). Or as Fiona Black puts it, “the grotesque body is the body in process, never the complete, closed and hardened body, but always the body *in the act*.”⁴⁰ In the final analysis, it is fundamentally earthy, evolving, encompassing, and profoundly “connected to the rest of the world.”⁴¹ Russo agrees with Bakhtin’s example of the crones as the grotesque *par excellence*, because their collective body “very strongly” typifies the notion of flux; as Bakhtin avers, “[t]here is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed ... Moreover, the old hags are laughing.”⁴² The various qualities expressed by crones—the ability to efface by marrying distinctions; triumph over temporality; and defying the status quo (implied by their laughter)—consolidate as their perpetual metamorphosis. In this regard, it is not surprising that some feminist scholars would view the female grotesque as a potent image of transcendence and female empowerment.

When it comes to Lim's poetry, this affirmative image of the grotesque is arguably implied in "Ah Mah" (whose subject, incidentally, is akin to a crone), albeit only periphrastically. Despite using terms like "[h]elpless, hopeless" and "tortured" to describe the grandmother figure, the persona clearly views her elder with detachment and as such, is arguably unable to objectively read her when we take into account the poem's uncertain tone. After all, it is possible that grandmother perceives her own bound feet as not only enabling, because they raised her social status and allowed her a comfortable life (she is dressed in silk, attended to by servants), but also as a form of transcendence because the fetishized body part preserved her sexual innocence (her husband "swore he'd not dress [her] with sarong / of maternity"), and therefore her uncorrupted state.⁴³ In this regard, the persona's question if Grandmother "[h]ad ... / been child forever?" takes on a greater poignancy.⁴⁴ What is deformity to the persona may in the end be empowerment to the grandmother, who, like Bakhtin's hags, although secretly, may be laughing audaciously at the indeterminate status quo, degraded yet also now transgressively represented in the persona's modern feminist vision. A more direct illustration, however, of the redemptive female grotesque is "Women's Dreams," an earlier poem collected in *Monsoon History*.⁴⁵ A sixteen-line ode to the female body and the power of women's imagination, it indubitably lends itself to grotesque imagery just because the act of celebrating these attributes is already inherently transgressive. Foregrounded as "hairy parts," "breast and buttock," "arm-pits," "[b]at-like in the furred, mammalian cave," the female body in the poem is depicted in all its base, primal, and uninhibited glory that despite being embodied by:

... crones still, clumsy magicians.
Even fat and ugly may stir a cock
And lord it for a day and a night.⁴⁶

Whether Lim is familiar with the concept of grotesquerie and its surrounding scholarship is unclear, but the implication of a female body that "achieve[s] liberation from material constraints" imposed on it by the masculine symbolic order and remains vitally exuberant in its expression of excess and defiance, undoubtedly gestures towards such a disconcerting, obscene image.⁴⁷ And that the poem specifically mentions "crones" only seems to further ensure that its inclination towards the grotesque cannot be ignored.

Conclusion: The Limits of the Grotesque

Despite the apparent intimation of an approbative female grotesque in the case of "Women's Dreams," there are elements in the poem that suggest at the same time that the empowerment and potential these dreams signify are ultimately exiguous and doubtful. The implication of dreams in the poem's title could be read as indicative of an unfeasible vision, whereby the idea that women can embrace grotesquerie and revel in their materiality to defy their determination by the status quo is nothing more

than wishful thinking. However, even if possible, just as the Bakhtinian grotesque's capacity for transgression is limited to the duration of the carnival, after which the hierarchy it had temporarily overturned would return to its original status, the grotesque female's subjugation of the male-driven symbolic order (i. e., "lord" over "cock") can only occur for a brief interlude ("for a day and a night"), before it is again suppressed by the latter.⁴⁸ Feminist scholarship on the grotesque championed by Russo and others has undoubtedly demonstrated the effect "understanding [grotesque images] ... [would] have for reading and viewing [literature], especially in gender-critical terms," and my essay has, in part, attempted to do this with Lim's poetry by interpreting the grotesque image corresponding with the family trope in order to unveil the gender-critical persuasions that underpin her verses.⁴⁹ But as Erica McWilliam has warned, while the grotesque, on the one hand, is "dangerous [because] it can 'unmask' much that is oppressive and objectifying for women, it can equally, on the other, 'unmake' any identity politics, including the very feminist work that insists on bringing it forward for scrutiny."⁵⁰ Indeed, for all its performance of dissidence and excess in allowing the female body a platform for articulating and celebrating itself, the grotesque, in the end, can be enlisted as an agent to reinforce gender status quo as well. Lim's poetry arguably also subscribes to this tendency, which can be observed in verses focusing on the maternal figure that distinctively deploy grotesque imagery to censure a woman who refuses to comply with the symbolic order's expectations of what her gendered role should be. Moreover, and notwithstanding Lim's personal history, that the persona in these various poems distinctively labels the maternal figure as an inverted and perverse configuration of motherhood and an overindulgent woman clearly discloses the persona's own patriarchy-inflected prejudices, which in turn underscores the irony of her claim that her mother is "stuffed full of / ancestors, recessive genes" in "Mother's shoes."⁵¹ Here, rather than promoting feminist sensibilities, the grotesque instead works to obstruct them, and in the process, reiterates the very view of the traditional family and its restrictive, discriminative coding of gender that Lim ostensibly criticizes in her other poems and her fiction.

Notes

¹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Mr Tang's Girls," in *Two Dreams: New and Selected Stories* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1997), 26–40.

² "Thirst" is also unique amongst Lim's fiction in that it is her only narrative to date whose primary characters are not ethnically Chinese. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Thirst," in *Two Dreams: New and Selected Stories* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1997), 136–52.

³ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "The Good Old Days," in *Two Dreams: New and Selected Stories* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1997), 84–95.

⁴ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "All My Uncles," in *Two Dreams: New and Selected Stories* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1997), 75–83.

⁵ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Joss and Gold* (Singapore/Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International, 2001).

⁶ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998); and Shirley Geok-lin Lim. *Monsoon History* (London: Skoob Books, 1994).

⁷ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Ah Mah," in *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998), 13–14.

⁸ See Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, "Interview with Shirley Lim," 1995, in *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum, and Peter C. Wicks (Petaling Jaya: Longman, 2001), 305.

⁹ Lim, "Ah Mah," 13–14.

¹⁰ Quoted in Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (London/New York: Routledge, 2013), 3; emphasis original. The term is derived from "grotto-esque," which describes "the ornamental style of frescoes at the so-called Palace of Titus [also known as Flavian Palace and the Villa of Titus, completed in AD 92], which showed enlaced and involved [meaning sexualized] admixtures of plant, human, and animal forms growing in and out of each other" (Alison Milbank, "Bleeding Nuns: A Genealogy of Female Gothic Grotesque," in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, ed. Diana Wallace, and Andrew Smith [Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009], 79).

¹¹ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 3.

¹² Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 3.

¹³ Rune Graulund, "Restrained Excess: Where Sophistication Meets the Grotesque," *Philosophy and Literature* 39, no. 2 (2015): 343; inset quote from Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

¹⁴ Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 176.

¹⁵ Quoted in Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), 32.

¹⁶ Mary Russo takes issue with Weiskel's claim and argues that "historical accounts of the grotesque" strongly imply it is more likely the other way round (Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 32).

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (1791), trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1952), 106.

¹⁸ Examples of artists associated with the grotesque include painters Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516) and Francis Bacon (1909–92), and photographer Cindy Sherman (b. 1954). In literature, authors whose work often feature grotesque imageries include Carson McCullers (1917–67) and Angela Carter (1940–92), to name just two.

¹⁹ Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 2.

²⁰ Bernard McElroy, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 5.

²¹ James Goodwin, *Modern American Grotesque* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), 1.

²² Margaret Miles, “Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque,” in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, ed. James Luther Adams, and Wilson Yates (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 96, 97.

²³ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Father from Asia,” in *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998), 23.

²⁴ Lim, “Father from Asia,” 23.

²⁵ In the Greek myth, Cronus was finally destroyed by Zeus with the help of his brothers, Hades and Poseidon, who then went on to form the new pantheon of gods.

²⁶ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 193.

²⁷ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “My mother wasn’t,” in *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998), 6–7.

²⁸ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist* (Singapore/Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International, 1996).

²⁹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Mother,” in *Monsoon History* (London: Skoob Books: 1994), 5.

³⁰ Graulund, “Restrained Excess,” 352.

³¹ Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 7; quoted in Graulund, “Restrained Excess,” 352.

³² Graulund, “Restrained Excess,” 347–48.

³³ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Mother’s Shoes,” in *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998), 8.

³⁴ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Ballad of the father,” in *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998), 17–18; “Father in China” in *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998), 19–20; “Black and white,” in

What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998), 21–22; and “My Father,” in *Monsoon History*, 23; and “My Father's Sadness,” in *Monsoon History*, 23.

³⁵ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “The double,” in *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998), 37. One poem that presumably directs criticism at the father figure is “The Rebel” (Lim, *Fortune Teller*, 33); however, its representation of the persona's uncles as womanizers, gamblers, and opium addicts that is tinged with envy—even admiration—also negates the supposed invective underscoring in the verse.

³⁶ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Watching,” in *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998), 24.

³⁷ Lim, “Watching,” 24.

³⁸ Miles, “Carnal Abominations,” 90.

³⁹ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 14.

⁴⁰ Emphasis original. Fiona C. Black, “Beauty or the Beast: The Grotesque Body in *The Song of Songs*,” *Biblical Interpretation* 8, no. 3 (2000): 310.

⁴¹ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 63.

⁴² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1965), 25–26.

⁴³ Lim, “Ah Mah,” 13. It is therefore unlikely that the subject is the persona's biological grandmother but is instead a grandmother in the sense that she is the grandfather's second wife. Polygamy was common amongst wealthy Chinese families up until 1949, when it was banned by the Communist government in China. In Malaysia, it continued to be practiced among non-Muslims until it was forbidden by the *Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act 1976*.

⁴⁴ Lim, “Ah Mah,” 13.

⁴⁵ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Women's Dreams,” in *Monsoon History* (London: Skoob Books: 1994), 165.

⁴⁶ Lim, “Women's Dreams,” 165.

⁴⁷ Alison Milbank, “Bleeding Nuns: A Genealogy of Female Gothic Grotesque,” in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, ed. Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 82.

⁴⁸ Lim, “Women's Dreams,” 165.

⁴⁹ Black, “Beauty or the Beast,” 317.

⁵⁰ Erica McWilliam, “The Grotesque Body as Feminist Aesthetic?” *Counterpoints* 168 (2003): 220.

⁵¹ Lim, “Mother’s shoes,” 8.

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