Communal Mourning and Contemporary Elegy in Korean Poetry

Kim Hyesoon’s Autobiography of Death

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Abstract

An extended period of public mourning followed the 2014 Sewol Ferry disaster, one of South Korea’s largest maritime disasters which resulted in over three hundred passenger deaths. This article examines leading contemporary South Korean poet Kim Hyesoon’s narration of collective trauma in her elegy for the dead, Chugŭmŭi chasajŏn (Autobiography of Death, 2016). Drawing on the oral tradition, particularly the songs of female shamans, Kim facilitates a radical empathy with which her speaker enters the physical bodies of the dead and invokes their spirits. Kim’s polyvocal speaker traverses historical memory to excavate these deaths: Autobiography of Death connects the recent loss of life involved in the sinking of the Sewol Ferry with the structural injustice experienced by dissidents who were killed during South Korea’s democratization movement. I argue that Kim places her elegy in the public sphere by engaging the embodied memory of individuals to voice the transhistorical grief of the Korean community.

Keywords

An extended period of public mourning followed the 2014 Sewol Ferry disaster, one of South Korea's largest maritime disasters which resulted in over three hundred passenger deaths, including that of two hundred and fifty high school students. Contemporary South Korean poet Kim Hyesoon (Kim Hyesun, b. 1955) narrates this collective trauma in her elegy for the dead, *Chugūmūi chasajŏn* (Autobiography of Death, 2016). The first Korean recipient of the Griffin International Poetry Prize in 2019, the book enacts a ceremony: each of the first forty-nine poems corresponds to a day in which the spirit of the deceased wanders before entering the Buddhist cycle of reincarnation.

This paper demonstrates how contemporary elegy in the Korean context draws upon the oral tradition to articulate collective mourning. I analyze Kim's elegy as a 21st-century form of *muga*, songs traditionally sung by female shamans to help the souls of the dead enter the afterlife. In the rite for the dead Kim creates in *Autobiography of Death*, she facilitates a radical empathy with which her speaker enters the physical bodies of the dead and invokes their spirits. Kim's polyvocal speaker traverses historical memory to excavate these deaths: *Autobiography of Death* connects the recent loss of life involved in the sinking of the Sewol Ferry with the structural injustice experienced by dissidents who were killed during South Korea's democratization movement, many of whom were students.

I interpret Kim's work as a meditation on the costs of South Korea's compressed modernity, a period beginning in the 1960s when rapid industrialization and urbanization under a series of military dictatorships propelled the country from an agrarian and developing nation to one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world. Kim articulates the collective grief

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1. For a detailed overview of the Sewol Ferry disaster and an analysis of its causes, see Suh and Kim 1–31.
2. This article uses the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization for Korean terms with the exception of personal names that appear more frequently in English with an alternative spelling. In these cases, I use the alternate spelling, followed by the McCune-Reischauer romanization in parentheses the first time the name is mentioned in the text. According to Korean name order, a person's family name is placed first and their given name follows.
3. The conferral of the Griffin International Poetry Prize to Kim's *Autobiography of Death* reflects a recent trajectory in which numerous works of South Korean literature are circulating beyond the country and becoming world literature. Don Mee Choi's 2018 translation of Kim Hyesun's *Chugūmūi chasajŏn* (Seoul: Muhaksirhŏmsil, 2016) received the prize. Other notable authors whose works have circulated globally include Shin Kyung-sook (b. 1963), who won the Man Asian Literary Prize for *Ŏmma rŭl put'akhae* (Please Look After Mom, trans. Kim Chi-young) in 2012, and Han Kang (b. 1970), who was the first Korean author to be awarded the Man Booker International Prize for Fiction in 2016 for *Ch'aesikchuŭija* (*The Vegetarian*, trans. Deborah Smith).
of a nation still grappling with cumulative losses, both societal and in terms of individual lives, in the process of this rapid transition. I argue that Kim places her elegy in the public sphere by engaging the embodied memory of individuals to voice the transhistorical grief of the Korean community.

1 Gender and Transformations of Elegy in the Korean Lyric Tradition

Korean literature has a long tradition of elegy, beginning with some of the earliest recorded lyrics from the United Silla kingdom (668–935 CE). Among the genre of *hyangga*, vernacular songs produced between the 7th and 10th centuries, a few extant lyrics lament the dead. Written by a pupil remembering his teacher, "Mo Chukchirang ka" (Ode to Knight Chukchi, c. 692–702), elegizes the exemplary *hwarang* knight, and in “Che mangmae ka” (Requiem for a Dead Sister, c. 762–765), Buddhist monk Wŏlmyŏng remembers his sister and imagines their reunion: “Ah, I will polish the path / Until I meet you in the Pure Land” (Lee 72, 75). In the transition between the Koryŏ (918–1392) and Chosŏn (1392–1910) dynasties, a remarkable self-elegy is ascribed to Koryŏ statesman Chŏng Mongju (1337–1392). Refusing to accept the takeover by General Yi Sŏnggye (1335–1408, r. 1392–1398) and anticipating his death as a consequence of his loyalty to the Koryŏ kingdom, Chŏng writes,

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此身死了死了 一百番更死了
白骨為塵土 魂魄有也無
向主一片丹心 寧有改理與之
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Though my body perishes, though I die a hundred deaths,
Though my white bones become dust and soil,
whether my soul exists or is extinguished,
My crimson heart will not alter its unerring path towards you.5

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4 *Hyangga* were transcribed in the *hyangch'al* orthographic system, in which Chinese characters were used to represent both the phonetic and semantic content of Old Korean during the United Silla period (668–935 CE). For a discussion of the *hyangga* genre and its history, see Peter Lee 66–86.

5 Translation by the author.
In this *sijo*, a three-line vernacular verse form originally composed for sung performance, Chŏng simultaneously laments the impending death of his body and avows the eternal nature of his undivided heart.

While women were largely excluded from the literary arena before the 20th century and were rarely given the opportunity to study Literary Sinitic, the written language of the literati, some upper class women in Chosŏn who came from literary households received this education and were recognized for their work. Drawing from her life, Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn (1563–1589) wrote a notable *hansi* elegy, “At My Son’s Grave,” in which the pregnant speaker articulates her state of anxiety and enduring extreme grief following the successive deaths of her daughter and son. Female entertainers known as *kisaeng*, though members of the lowest class, were educated in literature and music, and their poetry was anthologized by male literati. *Sijo* elegies written by *kisaeng* such as Hongjang (late 14th c.) and Hwang Chini (fl. 1506–1544) mourn the loss of a lover at the end of a romantic relationship.

Examining these elegies in Korean literature, they are situated within a particular historical time and lament the loss of a specific person, such as a family member, friend, lover, or in Chŏng Mongju’s case, the self. In contemporary free verse, this specificity continues, for example in Han Kang’s *Hŭin* (*The White Book*, 2018), an autobiographical work that grieves the death of a newborn older sister who died hours after birth. What distinguishes Kim Hyesoon’s *Auto-biography of Death* within this long tradition of elegy in Korean lyric poetry is the transhistorical imagination she brings to bear on the collection. Kim relates that the ferry incident ignited memories of others who died due to the violence of the South Korean government during the democratization movement. She recalls,

I teach at a college near the childrens’ school. For a whole year I didn’t wear any clothes with bright colors. Going to work every day was like going to a funeral. Besides this ferry incident, there have been many other incidents in our country where people have lost their lives under the violent force of government. While resisting injustice, many have died on a massive scale; and many also have died because they had been unjustly accused. So whenever such unbearable events occurred, I wrote these poems. I also wrote them whenever death was near me or welled up

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6 The *sijo* became a representative lyric verse form during Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910). The verse form was first anthologized in the 18th century in the *Chŏnggu yŏngŏn* 靑丘永言 (Ever-lasting Words of the Green Hills, 1728).
Kim’s work responds to her lived experience as a citizen who endured a series of military dictatorships that were responsible for human rights abuses and which severely curtailed the freedom of expression.

Born in 1955 shortly after the Korean War (1950–1953) in Uljin, North Kyŏngsang Province in eastern South Korea, Kim Hyesoon is one of the most significant and inventive Korean poets since the 20th century. Kim made her literary debut in the influential journal Munhak kwa chisŏng (Literature and Intellect) in 1979, the year Park Chung Hee's (Pak Chŏng-hŭi, 1961–1979) authoritarian regime came to an end with his assassination. When Kim and another leading feminist poet, Ch’oe Sungja (b. 1952) became the first two women to publish in the journal, they were among the only female poets acknowledged in the predominantly male literary circles of the 1980s. While Kim was celebrated by female writers and feminist organizations such as Another Culture and the Research Center for Korean Women’s Studies in the 1990s, widespread critical acclaim for Kim Hyesun began late that decade, amid a shifting publishing landscape following democratization which reflected rising demand and opportunities for female writers. In 1997, Kim became the first woman to receive the Kim Suyŏng Literature Award, which was soon followed by additional accolades traditionally given to male writers, such as the Sowŏl Poetry Prize in 2000 and the Midang Literature Award in 2006. Kim’s work began to reach a global audience through translation in the 2000s, and in contemporary Korea, Kim’s influence is visible in the work of younger writers of both poetry and fiction, particularly female writers as varied as Kim Sunwoo (b. 1970), Han Kang (b. 1979), and Han Yujoo (b. 1982).

Kim Hyesoon’s work is inextricable from the history of South Korea’s democratization movement. In 1980, a year after her first poem was published, two hundred civilians were killed in the Kwangju Uprising at the order of the next military dictator, Chun Doo Hwan (Chŏn Tuhwan, 1979–1988). Many of those killed were university students. The massacre became a turning point in the decades-long democratization movement, mobilizing a broad coalition of resistance that eventually led to the achievement of an electoral democracy in 1987. To document the emotional registers of such a tragedy, Kim moved

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7 For an analysis of how the Kwangju Uprising became a catalyst for mobilizing South Korean citizens, see Namhee Lee 44–55. For a discussion of the vital role students played in the emergence of the democratization movement, see Chang 49–79.
beyond literary techniques associated with realism. As Abstract Expressionist painters such as Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) developed a new language in American painting that could better represent reality following the horrors of WWII, Kim Hyesun invented a poetic language to articulate the structural violence and social inequalities of postwar South Korea. She changed the technical standard. Kim's writing has been criticized as difficult, vulgar, and grotesque, particularly as it has disrupted conventions for female poets. In a 2018 interview, Kim is questioned about this perception and responds: "I'm just writing this reality as it is but people call that grotesque ... Personally I find so-called realist poetry much stranger, as if they held up a mirror only to the outside, to the everyday. I'm just following the traces of what I see" (Korean Literature Translation Institute of Korea).

Kim often employs abstraction and surrealism to articulate the interiority of her speakers. In “Naked Body: Day Sixteen,” the desolation of death: “Something like the clear eagle on your back / Something like the clear toenail inside your dark throat / Like the falling frail twilight and / the rising frail dawn / certain light caves in” (Kim Hyesoon Autobiography 30). Kim also engages musicality and lyricism to convey the inevitability of that despair: "In the corner of Mommy’s heart, a small black mole lifts its head / It becomes a song. A fabulous solo roams desperately looking for death" (Kim Hyesoon Autobiography 44). In creating her innovative poetic language, it appears that Kim was in dialogue with a multitude of writers. In addition to pathbreaking female contemporaries such as Ch’oe Sŭngja, Yi Yŏnju (1953–1992), and Kim Sŭnghŭi (b. 1952), she also absorbed the work of prominent male poets such as Yi Sang (1910–1937), whose surrealist poems also seek to give meaning-making agency to the unconscious, as well as the contemporary poet Kim Chiha (b. 1941), a leader of the democratization movement who gained a wide readership through his “vulgar” and demotic lexicon.

When Kim identifies “the violent force of government” as linking the deaths of dissidents during the democratization movement with the hundreds of high school students who drowned during the Sewol Ferry disaster in 2014, she alludes to the continuing harm of Park Chung Hee’s regime, which embedded structural injustice and oppression into South Korea’s society and political system. Park is one of the most controversial figures in modern Korean history. While his economic plan succeeded, it came at the cost of numerous human rights abuses. Pro-democracy dissidents, including undergraduate students, were imprisoned, tortured and killed for their activism. Park’s legacy would be
apparent to Korean readers, for whom a historical connection from the elder Park to the presidency of his daughter, Park Geun-hye (Pak Kŭnhye, b. 1952) would be clear. Park Geun-hye, the first female president of Korea, received strong support from a political base nostalgic for the exponential economic growth during her father’s regime.

The Sewol Ferry disaster occurred on April 16, 2014, a year into the Park Geun-hye administration (2013–2017), bringing into focus the corruption and negligence of her government. 304 people were killed when the ferry capsized, including 250 high school students on a school trip. Analysis of the Ferry disaster revealed that the ship sank because it was heavily overloaded, with water removed from the ballast to evade inspectors (Suh and Kim 6–7). The collusion between businesses and the government that flourished under Park Chung Hee’s regime, which maximized profits at the cost of citizens’ safety, was revealed to have continued during Park Geun-hye’s administration. Compounding this issue was the fatally slow and inept response of the government in the rescue effort. Although the Sewol Ferry sent distress signals as it sank, neither the Coast Guard nor the Navy were able to rescue many of the people trapped inside. Indeed, the majority of the survivors were rescued by volunteer fishermen who arrived earlier on the scene (Suh and Kim 8). Following a corruption scandal in 2016, Park Geun-hye was the first democratically elected South Korean president to be impeached and removed from office following months of mass protests known as the Candlelight Vigil.9

Given the familial connection between the presidencies of Park Geun-hye and Park Chung Hee, the Sewol Ferry disaster extends a history of corruption and oppression beginning with Park’s authoritarian government. Ji-Eun Lee asserts that while the narration of Korean historical trauma has traditionally been dominated by male authors, female writers in the post-Cold War period such as Han Kang have also begun to shape the writing of historical memory (Lee 360). Han’s novel, Sonyŏn i onda (Human Acts, 2014), addresses the repressed subject of the Kwangju massacre with a fragmented narrative that conveys the tragedy’s unfinished process of transgenerational remembrance (Lee 367). By articulating the collective trauma10 associated with the democra-

9 Park Geun-hye was impeached on March 10, 2017 and was later convicted of abuse of power and coercion. She was sentenced to 25 years in prison but after serving nearly five years, she was pardoned in 2021 by the next South Korean President, Moon Jae-in (Mun Chaein, b. 1953).

10 For empirical analysis on collective trauma following the Sewol Ferry disaster, see Woo et. al. Researchers from Seoul National University analyzed data from social media following the sinking of the Sewol Ferry and discovered that platforms such as Twitter were...
tization movement and with the Sewol Ferry, Kim Hyesoon joins this emergent wave of female writers who reconfigure history.

2 Autobiography of Death as a Contemporary Shamanic Chant

As a cycle that performs a rite for the dead, the first forty-nine poems of *Autobiography of Death* occur in a liminal space between worlds. As Kim notes, “In Korea, we believe that when someone dies, the spirit of the dead journeys to an intermediate space that is neither death nor life for forty-nine days” (Kim Hyesoon Interview 99). In a syncretic melding of Korean shamanism, the indigenous religious beliefs on the peninsula, and Buddhism, each of the poems is assigned a day that corresponds to the 49-day period where the spirit roams before entering the Buddhist cycle of reincarnation. The following section analyzes *Autobiography of Death* as a 21st century form of shamanic chant, focusing on its particular resonances with ssikkim kut, a ritual of purification for the souls of the deceased.

Kim has noted that because of the marginal position of women in Korean society, women’s literary traditions are rooted in Korean oral traditions, such as minyo (folk songs), sijo written by kisaeng, and muga, indigenous songs traditionally sung by female shamans in ceremonies to help the souls of the dead enter the afterlife (Choi “Korean Women” 529–539). The elegiac singing of muga occurs as an integral part of a shamanic ritual called kut. The three primary purposes of kut are to bring luck, cure illness, and comfort the souls of the dead by guiding them into the next world (Walraven 4). Ships are a common theme in muga and are a prominent visual symbol in the ssikkim kut, a ceremony which cleanses the impurities of the spirit so it can safely enter the next world (Walraven 70). Originating on the island of Chindo, located near the southwestern Cholla Province in South Korea, this ritual was designated by the South Korean government as Important Intangible Cultural Property No. 72 in 1983 and continues to be practiced today by female hereditary shamans. Eth-
nomusicologist Mikyung Park notes that on Chindo Island, circumstances such as drowning are among those that give rise to this “washing ritual performance” (Park 357).

During the ritual, the female shaman holds a long piece of white cloth which represents the spirit’s path to the afterlife. Slipknots are tied into the cloth and are pulled taut during the ceremony, the vanishing knots are understood to represent the cleansing of the soul’s impurities consisting of pain, hardships, and desires inseparable from the world of the living (Bruno 340). In the final part of the ceremony, called kilakkum, literally, “washing the path,” a paper boat is often placed on top of the long white cloth, showing the transit of the soul to the afterlife (Park 369). In Antonetta Lucia Bruno’s transcription of a ssikkim kut she attended on Chindo Island in 1988, the shaman asks the deceased, “Poor departed one / in which knot are you tied up?” as she performs the untying of knots in the cloth (Bruno 340–341). The shaman invites the deceased to free themselves from afflictions and desires of the world, a release that enables the soul to be purified and thus reborn: “I beseech you to go and become a Buddha / and be reborn in paradise, in the Hall of the Lotus Flower [adorned] with jade bells / in one of the nine degrees of merit, / go transformed into clear water” (Bruno 345). As the soul is “washed,” the shaman dances and consoles the dead, acknowledging the sorrow of their soul and reassuring them that their soul has been purified with water and freed of the world’s impurities and desires (Bruno 344).

Each poem in the cycle of 49 poems in Autobiography of Death is akin to one of these knots in the cloth, releasing the afflictions of the dead. In “I Want to Go to the Island: Day Twenty,” the speaker asks, “What if starting tomorrow the days without sunrise continue? / Then we’d be inside this black mirror 24 hours a day, and who’d dip a pen into the mirrorwater to write about us?” (Kim Hyesoon Autobiography 35). The speaker imagines that writing about their existence will provide relief and release from the opacity of death. In her previous work, Kim has drawn on one of the most well-known narrative muga concerning Paridegi, a princess who is abandoned because she is born female and who later journeys to the underworld to save her father the king. In a 2017 interview with her translator, Don Mee Choi, Kim describes herself as a shaman-like figure: “While I was writing these poems, I was probably possessed by a ghost, listening to death, then I held death in my hand and entered the house of death”

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*kut* was performed at the Asia Society in New York in 1994 and again in 2018. A recording of the latter performance is available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sregl_BaXIo.
(Kim Hyesoon Interview 98). Kim asserts that writing itself was a form of ritual performance required to end this possession:

I thought to myself that I needed to sing death, perform a rite for death, write death, then bid farewell to it. The way to send death away was to sing with my own death all the death in the sky and on the ground. I wanted nothing to remain for the reader after reading these poems, like nothing remains after mindlessly reciting a multiplication table, like seven times seven is forty-nine. I wanted the poems to vaporize. In other words, I wanted a ghost of collectivity to emerge from the poems.

**Kim Hyesoon Interview 97**

Kim both recognizes and unravels the desires of her dead speakers by asking their questions, giving them form beyond the black mirrorwater. "Asphyxiation: Day Forty-Six" articulates the most urgent wish of one of the Tanwŏn High School students as they drowned after the captain of the Sewol Ferry and crew members abandoned them to escape. The body’s pressing need for oxygen emerges in short, unpunctuated lines as the speaker attempts to breathe while underwater:

Because breath  
Such breath  
And breath  
Same breath  
Thereafter breath  
Thus breath  
Always breath  
Eventually breath  
Perpetually breath  
Yet breath  
However breath  
Therefore breath  
In spite of breath  
Breath till the bitter end

Death breathes and you dream but

it’s time to remove the ventilator from death  
it’s time to shatter the dream with a hammer

**Kim Hyesoon Autobiography 74**
As imagined in “Asphyxiation: Day Forty-Six,” death is a process enacted by the speaker's body and witnessed by the reader. The reader shares in the speaker's experience of drowning as poetic form heartbreakingly mirrors content: it is breath that eludes the speaker even as they call out for it in every line. In the end, it is death which breathes, shattering the dream of rescue. Yet the chanting of this wish carries the speaker to the afterlife, generating release from physical needs.

As a contemporary ssikim kut, Autobiography of Death washes afflictions not only from the souls of the drowned high school students, but also from those of murdered dissidents. In “Autopsy: Day Twenty-four,” the speaker recounts, “Under my blanket soldiers in blue outfits march with guns with bayonets ... I wake up from the dream and get out of bed / I hear my mom, sister, brother wailing in the living room / They say I’m dead” (Kim Hyesoon Autobiography 41). In a rare footnote, Kim writes that some details from the poem come from Cho Yong-bom's article, “A Psychological Study of Suicide Prevention and Societal Support for the Participants of the Democratic Movement, May 1980 Gwangju [Kwangju] Uprising.’” (Kim Hyesoon Autobiography 41). Integrating this information, Kim makes explicit the social and political context in which the activist's wandering spirit voices his desire for “revenge revenge revenge” against the soldiers who tortured and killed him. The Kwangju Uprising was initiated by undergraduate students at Chonnam University and became a turning point in mobilizing the South Korean democratization movement. Hundreds of civilians from the city were massacred by government troops at the order of Chun Doo-hwan. In connecting these tragic events, both of which entailed the deaths of students and civilians, Autobiography of Death underscores this cycle of injustice. Kim's work suggests that the promise of the democratization movement, for a democratic government free of corruption, remained incomplete despite the sacrifice of those who died during the movement. While ssikim kut is performed to cleanse the souls of the dead, one of its important ritual functions is to provide peace to the living. In light of the continuing corruption revealed in the aftermath of the Sewol Ferry disaster, Autobiography of Death also points to the limitations of the poetry cycle as ceremony. “Mommy of Death: Day Twenty-Six” asks, “What's the point of flying when the sky is the inside of a grave?” (Kim Hyesoon Autobiography 44).
Erasing Names: Embodied Memory and the Narration of Collective Trauma

Throughout her career, Kim Hyesun has emphasized the corporeality of writing as a woman, an act she considers distinct from the experiences of male writers (Yi “Continuing Orality” 375–376). Kim recalls that literary critics early in her career insisted she write poetry that could “communicate and benefit society,” while at the same time stating that a “woman poet is nature” who must “evoke something gentle and motherly” (Ch’oe et al. xviii). Kim rejected these criteria which male writers expected from women, characteristics celebrated in poets of the 1950s and 1960s such as Hong Yunsuk (1925–2015) and Hŏ Yongja (b. 1938) (Choi “An Overview”). Male literary demands during the 1980s could be compared, Kim contends, to “a single father who enforced a triple form of oppression on women: a father who oppressed an individual socially and politically, who crushed gender equality, and who mandated that women form their identity from the margins” (Ch’oe et al. xviii–xix). Kim relates that even in the 21st century, “We are still living in a Confucian culture of the Chosŏn period” regarding the patriarchal expectations of women (Choi “Korean Women” 532). The internalized gender oppression Kim experienced is harnessed in her work, which creates new possibilities for the written vernacular through explosive and fragmentary language that documents female experience through a poetry of embodied action. From Kim’s perspective, women “do” or “enact” poetry with their bodies as they write (Kim Hyesoon Yŏsong 11–12).

Kim maintains this connection to the body in Autobiography of Death, leaving the gender of her speakers open in this work. Part of the force of her poems stems from the ways in which they “enact the body,” activating the embodied memory of her speakers. Kim repeatedly explores human sentience after death, recording salient sense perceptions. In “Winter’s Smile: Day 19,” the speaker describes what it is like to have “come out of a warm body:” “Icy, like soil dug out from a flower pot / Sunny, like the sunlight fish stare at beneath the sheet of ice / Hot, like when lips touch a frozen doorknob” (Kim Hyesoon Autobiography 34). The speaker’s continuing senses heighten their experience of loss regarding the sensations of being alive. Through its insistence on the sentience of the speaker, the poem emphasizes their humanity and deepens empathy for the deceased.

In Kim’s elegy, the body is an active agent, engaging with and remembering its death. In “Lean on the Water: Day Four,” the speaker addresses both the water and the self as they become interwoven:
Lean your body on the water and cling to it
Can't bear it any longer. I twist my body
holding on to the fingers of water and
wear a coat woven with water's hair
I crouch and cover my face

Let's be slant together
Let's fall embracing each other

KIM HYEOSON Autobiography 14

As the demarcation of body and water dissipates, the speaker invites the water into an embrace as they fall. This is not a reflection of drowning as succumbing. Kim’s speaker acknowledges the water’s multi-pronged agency: it supports the speaker’s body even as it claims that body. After an initial struggle, the speaker remembers their body not simply being enveloped by the water, but grasping the water’s “fingers” and actively putting on a “coat” laced with the water’s hair. The tactility of this description heightens the speaker’s interiority, making legible their dense and layered emotions at the approach of death.

The speakers in Autobiography of Death are individuals with specific, embodied memories that extend past the moment of death, yet they remain anonymous. Whereas other elegies in the Korean tradition name their dead, these poems efface names in order to articulate the collective trauma of the Korean community. Kim states, “I never name the ferry or name the democratic uprising that took place in Gwangju [Kwangju] in my poems. Poetry is a place in which names are never called out. It’s a place where names are erased” (Kim Hyesoon Interview 98). Kim’s approach to collective mourning contrasts with commemoration through the inscription of names, as in Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. While carefully chosen details make clear that Kim is referring to specific tragedies in her poems, leaving out names and places enables them to hold a transtemporal resonance. One such exemplary poem is “I Want to Go to the Island: Day Twenty,” the most explicit poem from the collection to allude to the Sewol Ferry disaster without mentioning it directly. The speaker simply remarks, “You leave for the island in the middle of the night,” a destination that is never reached by the passenger:

For the thousandth time you don’t reach the island.
You won’t be able to reach the island anytime soon.
The moment you think arrival is near
You board the ferry in the middle of the night, dragging along a small bag.
The sound of the horn from the departing boat makes your heart tremor

**Kim Hyesoon** *Autobiography* 35–36

Through the voice of this individual, unnamed speaker, a collective subjectivity arises, one which represents the hundreds of students who never arrived on Cheju Island.

From the start of her career, Kim’s poems have long expressed a capacious understanding of embodiment in which individual bodies can extend beyond their singularity. In “A Song: Tolsoga,” one of her earliest poems from 1979, the speaker relates, “When my dead mother comes to me / and asks me to hold her up, for she has no feet,/ I take off my feet … When my dead mother comes to me / and asks to lend me, lend me, / I even rip out my heart” (Ch’oe et al. 77). The speaker grants the wishes of her deceased mother, giving of herself to the point that their bodies are interchangeable. The two bodies appear to cancel each other out, resulting in “a place where there is no one” (Ibid.). Here, the living body is grafted onto the dead, a metaphor for extreme and unending grief that consumes the speaker. With their bodies gone, the land echoes their presence: “two round moons ascend” (Ibid.).

As in this early poem, the departed in *Autobiography of Death* demand to be remembered. The recent poetry cycle goes a step further, channeling a transhistorical grief that engages the public sphere. Traversing multiple tragedies across decades, from the Kwangju massacre to the Sewol Ferry disaster, the accumulation of individual yet anonymous voices provides an outlet for the articulation of collective trauma and public mourning. Nan Kim observes that yellow ribbons became a signifier of public mourning following the ferry disaster and were later integrated as a symbol of dissent during the last three years of the Park government (Nan Kim 976). At its height in December 2016, coincidentally the same year *Autobiography of Death* was published, over two million South Koreans protested across the country. During these mass protests of the Candlelight Movement, the color yellow became a visible emblem of unresolved grief and anger towards a government the public worked to hold accountable. In addition to the resignation of Park Geun-hye, one of the demands of the protesters included salvaging the sunken ferry. The Candlelight protests achieved both demands: the ferry was finally raised nearly three years after it capsized, just weeks after Park was impeached and removed from office in March 2017.

The symbolic use of the color yellow in contemporary dissent movements can be traced, as Nan Kim’s fieldwork demonstrates, to the Kwangju Upris-
ing in 1980 (Kim 978). For South Koreans, yellow is a color of remonstrance, remembrance, mourning, and hope. In the public consciousness, the loss of life in the recent Sewol Ferry disaster is interwoven with the deaths incurred in the decades-long democratization movement that brought the country into the 21st century. The elegy Kim creates in *Autobiography of Death* brings this unspoken connection to light. The speaker of “Already: Day Twenty-Eight” acknowledges, “You are already born inside death / (echoes 49 times)” (Kim *Autobiography* 46). Kim’s rite for the dead excavates a cycle of structural injustice.

As a contemporary ssikim kut, Kim Hyesoon’s ceremony in verse seeks to open a peaceful passageway to the next life, each poem releasing worldly knots of suffering for the souls of the drowned high school students and murdered dissidents. The erasure of names in her elegy achieves the “ghost of collectivity” Kim worked to form (Kim Hyesoon *Interview* 97). Kim’s polyvocal speaker, like a traditional female shaman, enters the physical bodies of the dead and articulates their perspectives to narrate the collective trauma of the Korean community. The transhistorical lens Kim uses in her elegy exposes the cumulative losses South Korean citizens have endured during a process of compressed modernity. In a reflection of ceaseless grief as well as determination, the passenger in “I Want to Go to the Island: Day Twenty” repeats their journey to Cheju Island *ad infinitum*. Kim reveals the tremendous collective mourning following the Sewol Ferry disaster to be an unfinished and transtemporal lament.

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