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The Other Body in us: Pregnancy, Abortion, and Creativity in Chinese Women's Writing

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Abstract

This paper examines three contemporary stories focusing on pregnancy and abortion, by contemporary Chinese women writers Zhong Ling (Taiwan), Tang Min (China), and Xi Xi (HK), in light of current feminist intervention into Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics. In particular, the paper turns to Elizabeth Grosz' notion of corporal feminism and Julia Kristeva's conceptual explorations on her theory of the abject in order to propose a notion of female creativity that is grounded within women's bodily experiences and a notion of subjectivity that takes maternity as its epistemological model. The paper concludes with an extension of corporeal feminism to women's writing in the area of cultural translation as mastering what Mary Zournasi has called "the art of foreignness."

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Introduction

The problematic of sexual difference entails a certain failure of knowledge to bridge the gap, the interval, between the sexes. There remains something ungraspable, something outside, unpredictable, and uncontainable, about the other sex for each sex. This irreducible difference under the best conditions evokes awe and surprise; under less favorable conditions it evinces horror, fear, struggle, resistance.

Elisabeth Grosz *The Volatile Body*

Ever since the publication of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment,* the centrality of the body, as a figure of reading and a trope for critical intervention, has noticeably shaped the discursive path of cultural theory in Anglo-American and Francophone academic circles. If the frequency with which the word "body" appears in titles of academic publishing serves as one indication of the way corporeality has transformed critical thinking in the human sciences, what we are witnessing here is a radical revision of traditional epistemological paradigms. Conceptual expressions such as "bodily

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memories" or "corporeal phenomenology" and terms like "embodying" or "refiguring" are some of the more common examples in contemporary cultural theory that exemplify new discursive parameters re-thinking the philosophical premises underlying the split between mind/body, spirit/matter, and knowledge /experience.[1] But why this preoccupation with the body ? And what is the state of its current theoretical intervention ?

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva takes up the issue of how alterity and sexual difference are symbolically intertwined to inform cultural perceptions of foreignness. The occasion of Kristeva's critical intervention, of course, is the growing xenophobia in contemporary France and many other European countries that has in part been triggered by the collapse of socialism and the safety of its borders in Eastern Europe. A careful re-reading of the foreigner status in ancient Greece, in Europe of the Middle Ages, and finally in the discourse of Enlightenment allows Kristeva to trace a genealogy of foreignness that is at once marginal and central to Western philosophy's notion of the Self. Not surprisingly, that "Self" projects a masculine vision where "the foreigner becomes the figure onto which the penetrating, ironical mind of the philosopher is delegated -- his double, his mask" (1991:134). Embedded in the rhetoric of civilization, national culture, and civil society, encounters with foreigners serve no other purpose than to titillate the wandering mind of the philosopher and to affirm his sense of self-knowledge (1991:133). Kristeva elaborates Freud's theory of the uncanny and his notion of the unconscious, both of which delineate an *otherness* within the unity of the Self, and then forcefully asserts that "the foreigner is neither a race or a nation. The foreigner is neither glorified as a secret *Volksgeist* nor banished as disruptive of rationalist urbanity. Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided" (1991:181, original italics). This clearly implicates the split subject as the real issue of xenophobia, but Kristeva nevertheless distances herself from the suggestion that psychoanalysis alone can solve the problem. Indeed, she cautiously reminds us that "becoming foreign" has to do with something else: "Difference involving sex, age, profession, or religion may converge on the state of foreignness, support it or add to it [but] they are not one and the same. The group to which the foreigner does not belong has to be a social group structured about a given kind of political power" (1991:96).

Kristeva's particular emphasis that power-relations define the status of otherness echoes Foucault's influential work on the body politic - to which I will turn in a moment - and opens up a critical space for my own project in examining the relationship between alterity and sexual difference in the writings of three contemporary Chinese women writers. I want to focus on stories openly dealing with the topic of pregnancy and abortion, and propose a feminist notion of creativity which is grounded within female bodily experiences as well as a notion of subjectivity that takes maternity as its epistemological model. I find this project particularly compelling because the field of Chinese Studies, in which I work, has not remained immune to the fascination with the female body. In fact, scholars specializing in the pre-modern and modern Chinese periods have discovered the female body as a powerful discursive tool for addressing the unequal gender, race, and ethnic power-relations within the field.[2] As Rey Chow points out, however, such critical interventions all too often end up essentializing Western notions of the female body as structured around an individual and autonomous sense of the Self (1993). Similarly, Joan Scott, while examining this issue within the larger context of US academic discourse on identity politics, points out that the notion of difference inscribed in popular multiculturalism merely fetishizes otherness and somewhat dangerously affirms a completely ahistorical notion of experience (1992). Despite the best of intentions, this version of multiculturalism ironically empties the body of all its political significations and restores an essentialist notion of knowledge in the name of authenticity. How then, we might ask, should the body be re-positioned in order to avoid this problem ? And how might a feminist practice embedded in translation and a transnational context contribute to this important project?

Alterity and Sexual Difference: The Volatile Body

In an interview on the question of why the body figures so prominently in critical theory, Foucault maintains that "the emergence of the problem of the body and its growing urgency have come about through the unfolding of a political struggle" (Gordon 1980: 57). The political struggle to which he refers here is borne out of a philosophy of personal ethics that revolves around questions of civil society,

sexuality, and "technologies of the Self." For instance, Foucault's momentous trilogy on the *History of Sexuality* unravels the darker side of modernity: the emergence of a new and unprecedented disciplining of the body that accompanied the rise of parliamentary institutions and new conceptions of political liberty. Significantly, the disciplinary practices Foucault examines are the foundations of such modern institutions as army, school, hospital, prison and factory. These hegemonic spaces function through a "policy of coercions that act upon the body" (1979:138). In other words, modern society produces not individuals acting on their free will but "docile bodies" which are enmeshed in a " 'mechanics of power'..[that] defines how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines" (1979:138). Foucault's major contribution thus lies in demystifying the notion that power in bourgeois, capitalist societies has denied the reality of the body in favor of the soul, consciousness, ideality.

Feminists have found Foucault's work both empowering and disabling.[3] While his cartography of power outlines a useful trajectory for reading against the repressive forces in modern society, his concept of the "docile body" is not attentive to sexual differences and thus ignores the specificity with which society regulates gendered-perceptions of the female body. Among the many feminist revisions of a male-centered preoccupation with the body, the most eloquent contribution comes from Elisabeth Grosz and her attempt to articulate a theory of "corporeal feminism." Her concept of the "volatile body," I would argue, repositions the body as a producing and productive site of subjectivity and thus recuperates a sense of agency and resistance that is lost in Foucault's model. By asserting that "bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable," Grosz does not simply conceptualize the body as a blank page awaiting social inscription (1994:xi). On the contrary, she believes that the body's materiality compares to a "volatile surface" because bodies have the ability to "always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to *seep beyond their domains of control* " (1994:xi; italics added). Implied here is her controversial theory of body fluid escaping the patriarchal cultural corpus but staining its social fabric in the process (1994:195). Grosz points out that in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Mary Douglas body fluids, particularly those of the female body, are culturally seen as horrifying and disgusting, and she reminds us that this fear has nothing to do with the fluid itself. Instead, it solely exists because the system renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous. Grosz, therefore, advances her hypothesis that women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage (1994:203).

Central to Grosz' argument is her conceptual elaboration of Kristeva's theory of the abject. Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror,* sets out to outline a theory that challenges the Freudian notion of the unconscious based upon the ontological division between subject/object and inside/outside. Relying heavily on the work of Mary Douglas, Kristeva identifies the abject (e.g. food, body fluids) as something which is rejected by the body but whose symbolic meaning is not reducible to an object or a mere outside. She distinguishes between three categories of abjection: abjection towards food, which deals with bodily incorporation; abjection towards bodily waste, from which stems the horror of the corpse; and abjection towards the signs of sexual difference, as exemplified in cultural narratives that associate menstruation with pollution and maternity with monstrosity (1982: 3-6). Interestingly, Kristeva maintains that it is not a lack of hygene or health that causes abjection, but rather "what disrupts identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982:4). In essence then, abjection is directed against the "Other" *within the Self.* This "Other" takes the form of the abject but cannot be reduced to an identifiable object that reinforces a sense of Self as detached and autonomous. For instance, the experience of food loathing, which according to Kristeva represents the most archaic and basic form of abjection, supports her claim that the abject is not to be confused with a simple object:

> When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin
> surface of milk- harmless, thin as a sheet
> of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail pairing - I
> experience a gagging sensation and, still farther
> down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all
> the organs shrivel up in the body, provoke tears

> and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that mild cream, separates me from the mother and the father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since food is not an "other" from "me" who am only in their desire, I expel m*yself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself* (1982:3, original italics).

What deserves our attention here is the emphasis on *exclusion*, a process that sustains the abject as the "foreign" body in us but is not reducible to a neurotic or psychotic process and its negative modalities of transgression, denial, and repudiation. Significantly, *exclusion* is determined by *dejection, separation, and straying* and, as such, challenges the dialectics of negativity in Freud's theory of the unconscious. Unlike in desire, where the Other/ object represents a lack in the Self and thus cannot claim a positive identity, the modalities of *exclusion* render the boundary between Self and Other indistinguishable because there is no object to speak of. As the example of food loathing makes clear, when "I" deject, I "throw out" some-thing, but this thing being dejected is mySelf, and this "Self" separates "me" from "you." And when I stray, there is, literally and figuratively, no other object to my roaming than me/mySelf. In this sense, the mode of *exclusion* offers a model of subjectivity in which the "I" is simultaneously constituted as both a subject and object whose desire and unconscious defy the logic of a "lack."

However, the real advantage of employing *exclusion* as a mode of being lies in the non-essentialist, or what Kristeva calls "situationist" approach to subjectivity because, as forms of social practices, dejecting, separating, and straying are enforced by uncontrollable circumstances. Intriguingly, Kristeva considers the person in exile a perfect model of such a type of subjectivity. As a former Bulgarian national now living in France with French citizenship, Kristeva's concern with exile is certainly not surprising. As a practicing psychoanalyst, she has written eloquently about female experiences, and I would claim that her notion of space bears the mark of gender. Kristeva's concept of the exiled space as always already "divisible, foldable, and catastrophic" (1982:8) strongly resonates with the qualities of marginality, duplicity, and unpredictability she considers to be characteristic of the female space in society (Moi,1986).

In what follows, I want to argue that the modalities of *exclusion* and the trope of abjection productively and positively describe female experiences based on pregnancy, abortion and [literary] creativity. Indeed, the divisible, foldable, and catastrophic social space of the person in exile is analogous to the ambiguity surrounding the realm of maternity in the three texts below. My readings, therefore, aim to produce a female subjectivity in which the modalities of dejection, separation, and straying all conjure up a feminist understanding of maternity as a literal as well as figurative trope for female creativity. By doing so, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of alterity and sexual difference, i.e. of the Other body in women.

Pregnancy and Patriarchy as Female Self-Fulfillment

Zhong Ling's "The Isle of Wang'an" (1992) is a story about a woman, Hu Lili, who temporarily experiences marital problems, developing a feelings of abjection against her husband, Lin Qixiong, to the extent that she refuses to have his child.[4] The domestic problems begin when he becomes increasingly absorbed in his career, leaving her more and more alone at home. As her complaints fall on deaf ears, she decides to take a job as a reporter, and her life increasingly becomes busy with professional obligations so that physical intimacy with Qixiong stops altogether. However, the husband is under pressure from his family to produce an heir, and he sets out on a course of reconciliation by taking his wife to the remote island of *Wang'an* [Hoping for a Safe Return] to search for his great-grandmother's long-lost grave. The trip turns out to be very successful on both counts, and the time spent together without the daily stress of professional life is conducive to both physical intimacy and emotional closeness. The story thus ends on a positive note, with Lili overcoming her feelings of hostility and now actually desiring to become pregnant.

Critics have interpreted this story as a gothic tale in which women's full sexual desires and maternal yearnings are unleashed by the island's mythic power.[5] For instance, on the first night of their

stay in the island's rustic village inn, the couple makes passionate love after Lili overcomes her initial resistance. Afterwards, she reflects upon her own unexpected compliance and comes to the following conclusion: "The rain continued to pitter-patter outside, dashing against the windowpanes, ruffling the countless heads of yellowed hair. What a strange and wondrous island this was, arousing such feral instincts hidden deep within one's soul!" (1994: 81). Despite the attractiveness of such a reading, however, it can clearly be seen to repress another, and arguably more interesting, aspect of the story in which the body becomes a crucial site for contesting patriarchal control over sexual difference and foreignness.

To begin with, Lili's position is that of an outsider because, unlike Qixiong's entire family, she is only one-quarter Penghunese. The family's way of overcoming this regional difference is to incorporate her female body into domestic life. For instance, as a daughter-in-law, she must serve tea to her in-laws in the morning and dutifully take on all the household chores, including cleaning the bathrooms (1994:73). Secondly, the trip to the island takes place when Lili's frustration with her marriage is at a peak, and the very last thing on her mind is to have a baby with Qixiong. But what she doesn't realize is that the real reason for going to *Wang'an* is to "change" her mind. As the boat slowly steams into *Wang'an* harbor, Qixiong confesses:

> Grandpa told me yesterday that he often dreamed about his mother, and that she always looked sad and anxious in his dreams, telling him that while her neighbors had the roofs of their graves redone every year, her son and her grandchildren have never come to see her. With the wind and the rain beating mercilessly down on her home, she said she was so busy repairing the roof all the time that she has been too exhausted to send babies to her descendents. The reference to having babies was clearly intended for our benefit (1994:74).

Central to the gothic tale reading of the story as female self-fulfillment is the assumption that Lili wishes to become part of the Lin family and had initially been happy in her marriage. However, quite the opposite is true. Although married for three years, she has never quite felt a real "sense of belonging" (1994:70). This sense of foreignness stems not just from her regional displacement; she is also perceived by her husband as an "intruder" who disrupts and displaces his professional career with her constant appeals for more intimacy and attention (1994:70; 80). This is confirmed by the story's opening scene on the boat when Lili is left alone in the cabin. Feeling deserted, insecure, and trapped, she begins to feel seasick and, before disaster breaks, decides to join her husband on the deck. When she indignantly expresses her dissatisfaction, he silently gives her a "you-have-some-nerve-blaming-me-when-it's-all-your-own-fault look" (1994:70). As a matter of fact, at this stage of the marriage, both are "waging a cold war with each other" and, on the first night in Wang'an, Lili goes as far as to suggest separation (1994:75;81). It is revealing that in the scene on the boat, when Lili looks for Qixiong on the deck, her immediate thoughts are presented like this: "I'd better go up on deck too, I thought to myself. It never fails - whenever I need Qixiong, he's never around" (1994:70). When she finally finds him leisurely leaning against the railing, she bursts out: " Lin Qixiong, I almost threw up!" (1994:70).

Her anxiety here is expressed in physical terms and suggests that her feelings towards her marriage border on abjection. This is certainly intensified by the traditional Chinese custom of exploiting the labor of daughters-in-law. Even though Lili only needs to play the part of the "meek and subservient" daughter-in-law eleven days of the year, the couple's residence in another city, she absolutely loathes it and asserts: " I wouldn't have been able to stand it for even one more day" (1994: 72). Another indication of abjection can be found when Qixiong tries to interest Lili in some sex during the first night on the island. She vehemently pushes him away while blurting out: "I don't want to get cystitis again!" (1997:79). This comment refers to an incident, about a year into their marriage, when she wakes up one morning with severe pains. Alarmed at the sight of blood in her urine, she wakes her husband, but Qixiong shows himself indifferent and cold: "It's just a bladder infection. Go to the hospital at half past nine, and my friend will give you some medication" (1994:79).

It is at this stage in their marriage that Lili decides not to have a child with Qixiong. She no longer sees him as the "thoroughly masculine hunk who was also a tender and romantic lover," but rather as someone who is "cautious and reserved, a stiff, unfeeling cold

fish" (1994:75). When she learns of the family's behind-the-scene manipulation to change her mind about pregnancy, she chastises herself for her naivete, calling herself a "slow-witted clod" for not realizing earlier the ulterior motives behind the trip to Wang'an (1994:74-5). More importantly, however, she begins to see that, all along, she has been in love with her own fantasy and not Qixiong: "I met Qixiong when he was a senior and I a sophomore, and he became my first lover. A young woman in the throes of her first romance lives in a world of fantasy, seeing only what she wants to see" (1997:75).

Interestingly enough, Lili's paradigm of love reinscribes the epistemological contours of a womb. The story begins with Lili sitting in the cabin and literally being pregnant with thoughts of her childhood dream:

> During my teenage years, when I wouldn't even talk to boys, I had a dream in which I found myself lying in the stomach of an enormous whale. The whale was rolling and plunging through the waves, but I felt as comfortable as a babe rocking in a cradle. Now, sitting below the deck of the cabin of the ferry, I felt as though I really were inside the belly of whale, but the sense of freedom and security I'd known in the dream completely eluded me (1994:69).

The fact that Lili identifies here with the infant, rather than the mother, attests to the typical idealization of maternal love frequently found in the works written by Chinese women writers from the early 1920s.[6] However, in "The Isle of Wang'an" this reference only supports the feminization of *Wang'an* island in the story that eagerly awaits male fertilization. Incidentally, the use of the water metaphor to convey Lili's emotions during the act of sexual intercourse are familiar cliches of female eroticism that betray masculinist desires at work. Lili's initial doubts and resistance to marriage and pregnancy, her questioning of the patriarchal model, are ultimately futile, and she is finally seduced by the male power that offers sex and security as female self-fulfillment. In the final analysis, then, "The Isle of Wang'an" only raises the issues of resistance to pregnancy and marriage in order to fully restore patriarchal visions of female sexuality.

Abjection and Abortion as Female Resistance

Tang Min's "I am Not a Cat" (1990) is an usual and rare account of a woman's experience having an abortion at the same time as her cat suffers a miscarriage.[7] The story defies regular norms in more than one sense; the first section, entitled "My Cat and I," explores social prejudice against childless women, and the second, "I Am Not a Cat," details the abortion experience. The narrative style is very much like a report or personal testimony, most likely intended to underscore the indifferent and inhuman treatment women encounter in abortion clinics in PR China.[8] As a matter of fact, the title of the story as a subtle reversal of our assumption that animals are not human and human practices are not animalistic. In this respect, the story exposes society's hypocrisy when it comes to granting women a right over their own reproductive body.

The first section, "My Cat and I," begins with an impassioned condemnation of traditional notions of femininity. As the narrator points out sarcastically, the view that "women and children, mother and child ...belong together as naturally as heaven and earth" is so deeply-rooted in society that childless women, particularly in China, risk being ostracized or declared abnormal (1994:159). To make matters worst, the one-child policy and the privileging of boys over girls puts additional pressure on Chinese women not only to reproduce but to reproduce "properly" (1994:158). Despite scientific research that the child's gender is determined by the male, in China the failure to give birth to a boy is still blamed on women, as the narrator points out: "Those who can have children are held in greater esteem than those who cannot; and what's more , those who have boys can carry themselves more proudly than those who have girls" (1994:158).

Unlike "The Isle of Wang'an," neither pregnancy nor maternity are idealized here as female self-fulfillment. Instead, they are presented as socially, physically, and emotionally painful processes females are expected to put themselves through in order to achieve the status of "real" women. Society, according to the narrator, has never taken seriously the pain and agony women endure during childbirth, and "women who have adverse reactions to pregnancy are viewed as sissies or

fakers" (1994:159). They are expected to endure the sufferings and deprivations of pregnancy and birthing as part of their biological fate, and the logic that operates here is summed up simply in the phrase "A childless woman is not a woman," analogous to an ancient Chinese saying "A white horse is not a horse" (1994:159).

In the story, the narrator is forced to have an abortion because she is suffering from an inflammation of the kidneys, a disease triggered by her stressful career. The pregnancy itself is unplanned and untimely; however, due to an earlier agreement with her husband, she first decides to go through with it. But when she learns that her disease might complicate her pregnancy and damage the fetus, she decides to have an abortion, and the termination certainly better suits her career ambitions. Not surprisingly, she considers it more rewarding to devote her time to her writing than raising a child which she describes in this manner : "When women are forced to carry out the task of propagating the race, it becomes nothing less than a life sentence: pregnancy, birth, parenting, education.....There is no escape. And while women carry this heavy burden, they still have to work and make a living just like the men, all in the name of 'equality between the sexes'" (1994:161). This sense of motherhood as punishment rather than empowerment is certainly compounded by her physical experience of pregnancy:

> Not two days after I discovered I was pregnant, I began to throw up unremittingly. Food, water, - I couldn't keep anything down. Coincidentally, our cat also began exhibiting symptoms of acute morning sickness. Both of us would be hunched over while we turned our insides out, both emitting guttural noises that were more animal than human. Afterwards, we would like cadavers; the violent heaves of our emaciated chests were the only sign that we were still alive. There were times when I couldn't even make to the bathroom and ended up puking right on the floor, just like the cat. A few times, I even spat up blood (1994:160).

Throwing up water and spitting blood may be seen as exaggerated accounts of morning sickness, but what the narrator intends to convey is the strong sense of her mental abjection towards her unplanned pregnancy and society's patriarchal posturing about motherhood as a natural form of femininity. The whole system of pre-natal care, according to the narrator, is set up more for the sake of the child than for the well-being of the mother.[9] For this very reason, she and her husband decide not to inform the extended family about the abortion as everyone would definitely try to dissuade them: "How can you be so sure that you would die in childbirth? How do you know the baby will have birth defects? If we believed everything the doctors said, we would all have been dead a long time ago! Once you're pregnant, you should have the baby!" (1994:160). For the narrator, it is inhumane attitudes like these which perpetuate "women's servitude" and which should therefore be resisted (1994:161). The regimented, seemingly indifferent, atmosphere at the abortion clinic is also criticized. The patients are denied any privacy or respect by being asked to strip their lower bodies in front of each other and the hospital staff; instead of sympathy and emotional support, they are reproached for choosing abortion. In most cases, offering one's career as a reason is seen as selfish and unfeminine, implying, it would seem, that career women are not capable of maternal love.

Despite the overall negative portrayal of pregnancy and motherhood in the story, the narrator never calls into question the all-embracing power of maternal love towards the Other body in women: "Once a fetus begins to grow inside her body, a woman can never forsake the affection she has for this new life. This maternal love is the only thing that enables a woman to endure all the pain and hardships of motherhood" (1994:162). This observation is linked to the description of her cat desparately licking the dead kitten she has given birth to: "If even animals feel the loss so deeply, how much more so the human heart ? This inextricable bond to one's flesh and blood - can it be something beyond the comprehension of men ?" (1994:162). And the day after her abortion, she is grief-stricken: "Lying in bed, I wailed and cried my heart out. My whole life seemed empty after the loss of my child" (1994:162). Clearly, it is not maternal love but patriarchal control of the female reproductive body that the narrator finds abjectionable.

In "I am Not a Cat," maternal love and motherhood conjure up a mode of being in which the dynamics between Self and Other do not function according to the negative logic of difference and foreignness.

Rather, the type of subjectivity grounded in maternity constantly challenges the boundaries between inside/outside, same/other, I/you. As something that is both physiological as well as psychological, the maternal constucts a subject-position that does not oppose difference to sameness, or foreignness to familiarity. In this sense, abortion is an attempt to cope with the "divisible, foldable, catastrophic" maternal space exiled outside patriarchy's symbolic order. As a form of female resistance against patriarchal control over female reproduction, abortion can thus be compared to the process of abjection and its modalities to deject, to separate and to stray. Four days after her abortion, the narrator experiences severe abdominal pain and realizes that the doctor has failed to remove the embryo completely. Back in the hospital, she undergoes a second dilatation and curettage twice as painful as the abortion itself. Worst of all, she may now never get pregnant again. Significantly, the story ends with her thoughts straying along the path of uncertainty: "For a long time I wailed and howled like a desolate beast - was it anger ? remorse ? hatred ? I'm not sure I knew the difference" (1994:167).

Maternity and Mimicry as Female Creativity

Xi Xi's short story "Mother Fish" (1990) explores the issue of female [literary] creativity through two interlocking narrative strands: One presents a seventeen-year-old girl looking after her brother's pregnant goldfish, and the other centers upon her sexual awakening and awareness of her own reproductive body and the surrounding issues of maternity.[10] To sum up the plot, her younger brother leaves Hongkong to study abroad and, in his absence, entrusts the care of his fish-tank to her. It is clear, however, from the farewell scene at the airport that the brother is somewhat anxious about leaving his fish behind. While the relatives and friends all offer him advice on how best to use his time abroad, he keeps reminding his sister to look after his fish (1994:111). Soon after the girl takes the fish-tank into her care, the goldfish's belly begins to swell, and she begins to discover her own sexuality, falls in love, and soon believes she is pregnant. The girl's middle-aged aunt is also pregnant at the time, and while the girl accompanies her on various shopping trips to prepare for the impending birth, she discovers society's traditional and conventional hold over female sexuality and the reproductive body. The girl is clearly apprehensive about having engaged in premarital sex, and decides to have a secret abortion. But when she actually arrives at the abortion clinic in Shenzhen, a city on the border between Hongkong and PR China, she undergoes a series of tests and, to her great relief, learns that she is not pregnant after all.

The narrative makes abundant use of metaphorical as well as literal references to document the young girl's emotional journey of sexual self-discovery. For example, there is a description of lilies on top of the piano standing next to the fish tank: "Blossoms in full flower spread their cleft corollas to the widest. Stamens thronged around their fairy queen, their bright yellow pollen arousing insects to take their wings" (1994:109). Everything in the girl's environment, including her own body, becomes a sign of her newly awakened state, and, in a moment she feels unwell, she suddenly recalls a scene at the airport when one of her cousins handed her brother a pack of condoms (1994: 112). What we see here is a healthy sense of her sexual awakening, and the scene which describes her erotic feelings during sexual intercourse clearly shows that she is enjoying it (1994:113). However, her anxiety over pregnancy becomes so overpowering that she soon loses sight of her own pleasure. Immediately after remembering the condom incident, she reflects: "It was very well for the Family Planning Association to hand out these free gifts to all the men passing by on the street, ... but the ones who really needed protection were not the adults, nor the lusty young men just beginning to feel their oats, but the callous young maiden still innocent of the ways of the world" (1994:112).

Her own innocence in sexual matters is revealed in her gradual learning about the differences between female goldfish and women. For instance, she discovers with a great sense of awe that the bellies of female fish, even when separated from the opposite sex automatically swell up with eggs (1994:119). She also learns that male fish are "frail-looking" and rarely make it into adulthood, so her fish tank, much to her surprise, is "an all female-kingdom" (1994:114). These references, I would argue, not only provide a window into her sexual awakening but also validate the physicality of the maternal realm as an important component for understanding female subjectivity. At the height of the goldfish's pregnancy, the girl cannot take her eyes off the "bulging belly" and, while wondering "whether the fish's stomach

would explode like a lighted firecracker," she also notices "its eyes turning towards her with warmth and affection" (1994:115). Similarly, her thirty-eight-year-old aunt about to give birth "seemed cheerful and content, full of the joy of motherhood" (1994:122).

As in the previous story, in "I am Not a Cat," maternity itself is not seen as either foreign or threatening to women. Instead, what are at stake for a feminist reading are the social conventions limiting female sexuality to patriarchal definitions of motherhood. In the shopping scene with her aunt, for example, the girl is depressed to realize that unmarried women who are pregnant are not welcomed by society. Later, when a moment of panic persuades her to seek help, she quickly reminds herself that "the Family Planning Association was set up to help those women who were, or were about to be, married and starting families....what kind of reaction would she - an unmarried seventeen-year-old girl - get ? " (1994:121). In other words, female sexual desire and maternity are only acceptable within the space provided by patriarchal law.

The most interesting aspect of the story is the narrative structure which employs the third-person throughout, with the exception of the final section and three instances in the text in which the voice of a first-person is inserted. This "I" assumes a mysterious existence, sharing part of the young woman's unconscious mind and hiding its identity until the very end. For instance, the story begins with a scientific description of the fish tank, followed by some general comments about the indeterminacy of gender in fish before they reach maturity. This is, then, followed by a lyrical description of the lilies which decorate the piano next to the tank. The final lines are: "I could hear the flowers singing their hallelujahs. Flowers, those trumpets of the angels. I remember the fragrance of the lilies" (1994:109). The second "intrusion" of the first-person happens during the shopping trip with her pregnant aunt. Again, the "I" is embedded in a minute description of a scene: A quaint window-display of an English tea-time table with scones, jam, and Devonshire cream. The narrative concludes with these words: "The sound of an unseen piano came wafting from the mezzanine. Perhaps it was Aeolus' whistling. I could hear the murmuring of gods. I remember the sweet taste of the scones" (1994:118). It is, of course, not until the end of the story that the mysterious "I" is identified as the aborted body, the "Other" voice which has been silenced:

> I am your tousheng, your firstborn, born out of your head. I am your fantasy. Most tousheng creatures are but fictional characters created by writers, brought to this world for the sake of the story. I do not belong to the story, nor did you create me in order to write a story. It was as a result of love's taking shape that you conceived and gave birth to me (1994:127).

On one level, "Mother Fish" is obviously a story that protests the "abortion" of female [literary] creativity, of excluding female ideas and silencing female voices from the symbolic order. On another, however, the story seems to validate patriarchal power by employing maternity and birthing as tropes for redefining female creativity. Metaphorically speaking, I would argue, the "I" in the passage above embodies the abject-cum-aborted ideas that spring from the female corporeal mind, but which is forever condemned to silence by the cerebral body that enacts the social censorship on female sexuality and erotic desires. Literally speaking, the "I" represents the "Other" body in woman, or more precisely, the aborted female Self that refuses to submit to patriarchal indoctrination. Speaking as the abject, this "I" reminds us that it is not an Other but the exiled Self: "You have spared no pains in your effort to stow me away, to keep my existence a secret; you stand ready to destroy me, because I represent darkness and shame. This is your sorrow, the sorrow of the female sex. Why do you continue to submit to a life of such humiliation and self-abasement ?" (1994:127). The answer to this, of course, lies in patriarchal control over the social space that only valorizes married mothers but not female desire. During the shopping spree with her aunt, the girl's thoughts are presented as this:

> The place was full of things she ought to be buying but couldn't; on the other hand, it had none of the things she needed, like a wonder drug, or one of those horrible, grim-looking surgical tools.... Standing in the midst of this fairy-tale world of little white bunnies and baby squirrels, she, however, felt terribly depressed. What she carried inside her was not a little angle. Those who cared for mothers cared not for mothers like her (1994:117).

In the story's concluding paragraphs, the aborted "I" delivers an eloquent attack against an entrenched perception of maternity in exclusively biological-reproductive terms: "Writers take loving care of their tousheng characters, bringing them to maturity, breathing life into them, displaying them proudly before all. Most mothers are like this too" (1994:127). The female creative process, in other words, can be seen as a productive mimicry of maternity and thus should be recognized as a process of discovery, creation, and propagation. Analogous to the aborted child that continues to live within us, our ideas which are denied expression never really completely leave us: Neither foreign nor different but an integral part of and within us, they are truly our other Selves:

> It's been only three months since my birth, yet I have already lived with you for awhile; through sunshine and story weather. Since you gave birth to me out of your head, before all else, I have become part of your memory, your consciousness, a spray of ever-flowing spindrift in the ocean of your mind. I wish you health and happiness; I pray that you will grow stronger, mother (1994:127).

Conclusion

Foreign Dialogues: Writing Women And Corporeal Feminism as Translation

In her introduction to *Foreign Dialogues*, a collection of interviews and conversations with women who write, live, and work in a country not of their birth, Mary Zournasi examines the issue of foreignness. Interestingly, her project began with no clear theoretical agenda, but in the course of talking to various women engaged in writing, it soon became clear that she was going to focus on "an aesthetics and politics of writing, that is, the production of and reflection on foreign life" (1998:10). Drawing on the experience of an ethnically diverse group of women, Trinh Min-ha, Eva Hoffman, Elspeth Probyn, Ien Ang, and Sneja Gunew to mention just a few, Zournasi calls this aesthetics the "art of foreignness" and explains its modalities in the following way:

> The art of foreignness is about the practice and production of speaking the self through a myriad of identities. ....[it] is about the spaces that exist between how we speak identity and the production of it.....It is the capacity to move outside and within the stories of longing and belonging that produces different identities. So, as a movement between memory and life writing, the art (s) of foreignness is about an ethical relationship and the conveyance of experience that exits outside and between common modes of perception and understandings of identity (1998:11).

Although this quote would seem to suggest that Zournasi is dealing here with identity politics, her real concern is, in fact, the issue of translation, i.e. of how language is transported along different routes to different cultural spaces. It is important to note here that Zournasi's notion of translation refers to a process of transcription and transformation that remains open to the foreignness of languages and the speaking voice. Only in this understanding of translation, she argues, is the body "allowed to re-emerge through a different posture and modulation for the reader" (1998:13). Interestingly, Zournasi here reinscribes a corporeal notion of language and translation that resonates strongly with Grosz' concept of a corporeal feminism and brings us back to the idea of volatile body and the quote at the beginning of this paper. I have chosen this particular passage because it seems to me that the "ungraspable, unpredictable, and uncontainable" something between the sexes has to do with language and representation, and translation can be cited as one example. Women's writing, as I have argued elsewhere, can be seen as a form of cultural translation, a process of transcription and transformation of patriarchal language and values.[11] What I find particularly empowering about the idea of cultural translation in relation to women's writing, foreignness, and sexual difference is the conceptual emphasis on routes rather than roots. This shift, I would claim, constitutes an important attempt to move away from a concern with "origin" and "authenticity" to a commitment to possibility. That itself is the result of specific historical constellations and trajectories often beyond individual control. Nevertheless, this does not imply a lack of opportunities for critical intervention or other forms of social agency. Rather, it means accepting the limitations of representation without giving up on it. To return to the quote with which I began, under the best conditions, as Grosz reminds us, this attitude

should at least inspire both a sense of awe and surprise.

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Supplementary Information

1. The terms “bodily memories” and “corporeal phenomenology,” as well as the quote that precedes this essay, are taken from Elisabeth Grosz, *The Volatile Body: Towards a Corporeal Feminism.*
2. See, for instance, Tani Barlow and Angela Zito (1994), Frank Dikötter (1995), Charlotte Furth (1999), Gail Hershatter (1998), Dai Jinghua and Meng Yue (1989). This list is, of course, by no means exhaustive.
3. Feminist critiques on Foucault abounds. For some insights see the essays in Diamond and Qiunby eds. *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, and Jane Sarwicki *Disciplining Foucault.*
4. The English here is taken from David Wang ed. *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers*. The original “Wang’an” appeared in Zhong Ling’s collection of stories *Shengsi yuanjia* [A Destined Couple], 1992.
5. See David Wang, “Chinese Fiction for the Nineties” *in Running Wild,* p.247-8.
6. See the excellent study of Sally Lieberman *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China.*
7. The English translation is taken from David Wang ed. *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers.* The original “Wo bushi mao” appeared in Nüxing ren [Woman/Men], volume 3, 1990.
8. On abortion issues in PR China, see Harriet Evans’ chapter in her *Women and Sexuality in China.*
9. This also seems to be the case in pre-modern Chinese practices regarding childbirth and gestation. See here Charlotte Furth’s exceptional study *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China’s Medical History, 960-1665.*
10. The English translation is taken from David Wang ed. *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers*. The original “Muyu” appeared in Xi Xi’s collection of stories under the same title, 1990.
11. 11 See my “‘Am I in That Name ?’ Women’s Writing as Cultural Translation in Early Modern China” forthcoming in “Beyond Europe,” special issue of *Comparative Literature.*