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"a site of perpetual farewell and return": Hauntological Returns and the Geopolitical Poetics of Don Mee Choi's *Hardly War, DMZ Colony,* and *Mirror Nation*

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Abstract

South Korean poet and translator Don Mee Choi's recently completed trilogy—including *Hardly War* (2016), *DMZ Colony* (2020), and *Mirror Nation* (2024)—explores personal and collective histories and different notions of return. This article traces the motif of return in the beginning of the three books in relation to Derridean hauntology. Don Mee Choi's trilogy—in which she explicitly defines her poetics as geopolitical—portrays a hauntological engagement with the past by evoking and rewriting supposedly forgotten personal and collective histories. Furthermore, the article reflects on how this relates to Don Mee Choi's practices of writing and translation. The article focuses on how returns to the past are formally represented in the trilogy through repetition in the form of intertextual references, quotations, parallelisms, specific imagery and symbols. The motif of return, therefore, serves as a lens through which the spectral elements of anachronism, haunting and mourning can be traced.

Keywords: hauntology, Don Mee Choi, return, rewriting, haunting

In her published speech titled *Tongueless Mother Tongue*, South Korean poet Kim Hyesoon says: “Ghosts have been crushed in the writing of history. Ghosts swarming in the void of history. Ghosts hidden in the language of women. The poet mines ghosts. What is dead yet alive.”[1] This evokes several questions and implications relating to the notions of history and the writing of history, and how they contrast with poetry and the writing of poetry—work which, in her words, involves the *mining of ghosts*. Of course, this also evokes questions and implications of what she means when she talks about *ghosts*: that which is “crushed in the writing of history” and “hidden in language,” that which “swarms in a void,” that which is “dead yet alive,” that which requires unearthing. The work of the poet, which Kim Hyesoon refers to as a work of unearthing, can therefore be understood as a work of spectral conjuration. It is with this idea of *ghost mining* in mind and through the lens of what Jacques Derrida referred to as a “logic of haunting” that I will read Don Mee Choi’s poetry.[2] Such a reading ties itself together by what is, one might say, “hidden in” (or between) languages, in this case, “of women.” Don Mee Choi has translated several works by Kim Hyesoon into English. I also happened to reread Don Mee Choi’s poetry, which I first encountered in 2022, at around the same time as the publication of the German translation of *DMZ Colony* by poet Uljana Wolf in 2023. How writing and translation are linked in Don Mee Choi’s poetic practice will be an underlying question to be traced throughout this article.

In her recently completed trilogy—*Hardly War* (2016), *DMZ Colony* (2020), and *Mirror Nation* (2024)—Don Mee Choi explores personal and collective histories as well as different notions of *return*. Born in Seoul and having migrated to Hong Kong in 1972, then later to the U.S., she examines her family history in relation to national Korean history from the twentieth century until today. The notion of return—in a spatial sense, returning to one’s origin, birthplace, and home, and in a temporal sense, returning to the past—is a recurring motif in all three books on the levels of content and form. It is unsurprising that her work has been described as “unclassifiable” and “unapologetically experimental.”[3] Apart from printed text, the three

books include a variety of different visual media, such as photographs, drawings, postcards or scans of handwritten text, which often appear fragmented, altered, or in collage. Although I will read them as poetry, the multimedial and multilingual texts challenge formal categorizations of genre, sometimes resembling prose, dramatic text, or libretto. In relation to form, the trilogy mirrors notions of return in different ways, such as through repetition in the form of intertextual references, quotations, parallelisms, specific imagery, and symbols, as well as through the reappearance of the same or slightly altered photographic media. I consider this formal composition of the trilogy, in relation to its engagement with hauntological memory and history.

By involving texts and media which are also historical documents (such as photographs taken by Don Mee Choi's father who worked as a photojournalist) the books complicate the distinction between historical text and literature. They demonstrate the capability of art to revisit and rewrite history. At the same time, the books portray an anachronistic polyphony exceeding the potential of historical texts. By quoting again the words of Kim Hyesoon, Don Mee Choi's trilogy can be said to unearth what "swarms in the void of history." By inviting different voices to converse through different medial forms, the three books establish an anachronistic, polyphonic archive: an archive which evokes the absent, traces the forgotten, and anachronistically links together past, present, and future. Reading Don Mee Choi's poetry as literature (and not historical text), my interest and perspective are motivated by the question of how such a poetic, hauntological archive is composed—in other words, what renders the engagement with the past in her books hauntological. As with all readings of poetry, my hauntological reading is one among many possible readings of such a rich text. And as with all readings, it depends on who reads and from which viewpoint. Certainly, these texts would be read differently by someone who knows the Korean language and history in more detail than I do.[4] Although the trilogy includes some Korean, it is written and published for the most part in English, making its material linguistically accessible to readers who do not comprehend Korean fluently (or at all). What remains unreadable to some marks

the presence of what cannot be fully comprehended and hints at the question of hegemonies among different languages. Moreover, the question of language/s relates to Don Mee Choi's poetics which she herself defines as *geopolitical*: "It involves disobeying history, . . . [and] strings together the faintly remembered, the faintly imagined, the faintly discarded."[5] These implications will be addressed in what follows.

Keeping this in mind, my close reading will focus on the first chapter(s) of each book in the trilogy, tracing how a hauntological perspective offers insights into how the absent is evoked in an engagement with the past, how voice is given to non-presences, and how these voices spectrally converse despite temporal and spatial disjuncture. To demonstrate this, the hauntological motif of return will serve as a lens through which the spectral elements of anachronism, haunting and mourning will be addressed. The two main questions to be considered are the following: firstly, in which way does the notion of return appear thematically and formally in the works? And more generally, how does Don Mee Choi's docupoetics portray a hauntological engagement with history and mourning, and in what sense can it be considered to correspond to a geopolitical poetics?

Towards a Logics of Haunting

A question of repetition: a specter is always a revenant.[6]
— Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

In *Spectres de Marx*, Jacques Derrida introduces the neologism *hantologie*.[7] As a "logic of haunting," it challenges the premises of ontology (as the near homonym in French indicates) since the ghostly disturbs the notions of presence and the present, thereby causing anachronism and complicating our relationship to the past and future.[8] Likewise, he states that "haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar."[9] This implies

that haunting describes a disturbance of linear temporality as it cannot be situated within the sequence of past-present-future. The figure of the ghost illustrates this, since it belongs neither exclusively to the past nor the present, as it might appear in the present only as a presence of an absence. As Katy Shaw puts it, "[t]he paradox of the specter is then perhaps best understood in terms of time, of a repetitious compulsion to return."[10] Indeed, the figure of the ghost as a *revenant* implies the anticipation of a reappearance in the future: "One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back."[11] In accordance, Grace M. Cho states that "[o]ne way in which to convey haunting is through the use of nonlinear temporalities, repetition, fantasy, and fiction."[12] Hence, since repetition and return as disruptions of chronology are crucial to an understanding of spectrality and haunting, hauntology can also be understood as "a science of what returns."[13] Rather than offering more unambiguous definitions of concepts central to hauntology—such as haunting, anachronism or mourning—I aim to trace how an understanding of these notions emerges through a reading of Don Mee Choi's works. In other words, I want to trace these theoretical notions in dialogue with literature, rather than imposing predetermined frameworks on the texts I read.

Therefore, particularly relevant for my hauntological reading of Don Mee Choi's trilogy is the inherent anachronism of her geopolitical poetics in its *disobedience of history*.[14] The "faintly remembered, the faintly imagined, the faintly discarded" that she describes in the passage quoted earlier echoes Kim Hyesoon's idea of the "[g]hosts . . . crushed in the writing of histor . . . . Ghosts swarming in the void of history."[15] These ghosts, although Don Mee Choi does not explicitly name them as such, can be read as absences made present through her return to and re-writing of history. According to a hauntological understanding, history and spectrality are intrinsically linked, since "the specter demands that we take its history into consideration."[16] Indeed, the trilogy does not follow a chronological order. Don Mee Choi's anachronistic, political-poetic intervention in collective historical narratives (or "mining of ghosts," in Kim Hyesoon's words) can be seen as an equivocal performative act of conjuration: on the

one hand, it is an act of evocation, since it expresses the unspoken-of ("hidden in language") and makes it present, on the other hand, it is an act of exorcism, since as grief-work it would counter haunting. However, it must be stressed that within the framework of Derridean hauntology, the dynamics of *conjuration*, as the French term would imply, bear an ambiguity which suggests that in every contact with the ghostly, evocation and exorcism are equally involved: "A conjuration, then, is first of all an alliance, . . . more or less secret, if not tacit, a plot or a conspiracy. It is a matter of neutralizing a hegemony or overturning some power."[17] In contrast to what is most likely an intuitive understanding of exorcism, Derrida therefore proposes that it might not be that one must get rid of ghosts but that one might have to learn how *to live with* them.[18] Indeed, he argues, that there is a decisively ethical dimension to hauntology, since "[i]t is necessary to speak *of the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just*."[19]

Don Mee Choi's Geopolitical Poetics of Disobedience

Hence, geopolitical poetics.
It involves disobeying history, severing its ties to power.[20]
— Don Mee Choi, *Hardly War*

Given this question of ethics in an engagement with the ghostly and Don Mee Choi's definition of poetics as geopolitical, the deep entanglement of the trilogy with history and related practices of memorizing, narrating, and documenting should be considered. The political and historical context which the trilogy engages with is most importantly shaped by the years following World War II, the Korean War, and the succeeding global entanglements of South Korea from the Cold War until today. As the speaker in Don Mee Choi's books recounts, her family emigrated from South Korea to Hong Kong in 1972. While she later went to study in the U.S., her parents moved

to Frankfurt and eventually to Australia due to her father's work.[21] An historical overview of twentieth century Korean history and, in particular, the history of migration and resulting diaspora in the context of Cold War Korea would go beyond the scope of this article. Yet only when contextualized in the horizon of certain crucial historical events of Korea, we can best understand Choi's trilogy in relation to hauntology. Such historical moments include: the conception of the Korean War as a "forgotten war"; Korea's colonial past; what she refers to as "neo-colonial" condition; the impacts of these on language; and the question of return to a homeland.[22]

The American branding of the Korean War as "the forgotten war" (which stems from the title of the 1987 documentary *Korea*: *The Forgotten War*, which is also referred to in *Hardly War*) illuminates the necessity for Don Mee Choi's evocation and rewriting of the past.[23] As Daniel Y. Kim points out, "the relative invisibility" of the Korean War, although it was "hardly conducted in secret," might be accounted for by its global historical context, namely the aftermath of World War II, the Vietnam War a few years later, and the overall geopolitical tensions during the Cold War.[24] As Grace M. Cho argues, to conceive the Korean War as *forgotten* then refers to "a black hole in collective memory."[25] Scholars such as Crystal Mun-hye Baik argue that the remembrance of the Korean War from an American perspective is largely determined by a binary, Manichaean Cold War historiography. This narrative is challenged by poetic works such as Don Mee Choi's trilogy, as well as historical research like the one conducted by the South Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As Baik writes, "[f]irst and foremost, the Korean War is not a hidden afterlife that dwells in the contemporary moment solely through psychic and emotional traces. The Korean War remains a tinderbox with life-threatening implications."[26]

In addition, the understanding of the Korean War and the trauma caused by it as a contained historical event is problematic as it should be considered in relation to the historical events in its proximity—mainly, the Japanese occupation until 1945 and the formation of North and South Korea as separate states with respective political

orientations in 1948. This, at times, led to the violent prosecution of supposed communist sympathizers in South Korea during and after the conventional time frame of the war between 1950–53, an issue which is thematized, for instance, in the sequence "WINGS OF RETURN" in *DMZ Colony*.[27] Further, it has to be noted that what followed in the decades after 1953—the historical context the trilogy primarily engages with—was authoritative governments, such as "the US-backed military dictatorship" of former South Korean president Park Chung Hee, which Don Mee Choi repeatedly refers to.[28] As Daniel Y. Kim phrases it, "South Korea had become virtually a police state during the war and remained so for decades afterward"—a political climate which not only meant violence and censorship but was also the reason for emigration in the case of Don Mee Choi's family.[29] In *DMZ Colony*, the speaker recounts how, as a child, she did not yet perceive this: "Like rats, children can be happy in darkness. But the biggest darkness of all was the midnight curfew. I didn't know the curfew was a curfew till my family escaped from it in 1972 and landed in Hong Kong. That's how big the darkness was."[30] That the political situation did not improve in the following decade was also the reason for Don Mee Choi's family not returning to South Korea. In a published letter to poet Christian Hawkey, she writes: "[a]fter witnessing the brutal crackdown of the democratic uprising, my father decided we could never return to South Korea. He didn't believe at the time that South Korea would ever be free from military dictatorship."[31] While the migration in the case of Don Mee Choi's family history is situated in this tense political context of Cold War Korea, it is also somewhat unique due to her father's occupation as a photojournalist (since most emigration from South Korea in the aftermath of the war consisted of women who, most of the time, married American military personnel, orphans and students).[32]

Of course, very much relevant for this politico-historical context is also the continuous military involvement of the U.S. in South Korea, which grounds Don Mee Choi's understanding of South Korea as a "neo-colony":

> The US established a temporary military rule of Korea from 1945 to 1948 and never left In time of war, the US military has operational control over South Korean forces. Since we are still technically at war, we are also technically and perpetually under US military command. I come from such neocolony.[33]

This not only describes Don Mee Choi's understanding of Korea-U.S. relations, but further hints at the political significance of language and translation in her translingual poetics. In her pamphlet, *Translation is a Mode=Translation is an Anti-neocolonial Mode*, she writes: "So my tongue even before it had ever encountered the English language was a site of power takeover, war, wound, deformation, and, ultimately and already, motherless."[34] Indeed, Korea's colonial past hints at the interrelations between language, power, and identity, as the repression of the Korean language during the Japanese occupation and the following post-colonial "purification" movements show.[35] As Young-Key Kim-Renaud explains, "[i]n the postcolonial and postwar era, on both sides of the 38th parallel, there has been a specific movement to 'purify' the Korean language, to make it shed all traces of what most, if not all, Koreans considered a shameful colonial past."[36] It is interesting to keep this in mind when examining Don Mee Choi's translingual artworks and, of course, her practice of translation, which she defines as an "anti-neocolonial mode" (as the title of her aforementioned pamphlet suggests). To understand translation and writing between languages in her trilogy in light of this political dimension, again underlines Don Mee Choi's understanding of her poetics as geopolitical. In the case of Don Mee Choi's poetics, one could understand the question of translation and the search for a language as a search for poetic form which seeks to reinvestigate these "sites of power takeover" in language, as in histories.[37]

Fittingly, Kim Hyesoon remarks in a published interview with Don Mee Choi that "[w]omen's and diasporic identities both exist at a margin. The only way they can survive is to run away from any fixed location. Their language is difficult for people in a fixed location to understand."[38] The particularity of such languages *from the margins*

seems to resonate with what Don Mee Choi recently, in an interview with Gabriela Denise Frank, described as "a third organ—an expelled tongue."[39] Of this third organ, she further says that it "is permanently displaced, in a perpetual state of farewell, and yet, like a womb, it's fleshy. It might be more accurate to say that it's one thick membrane, like a placenta, through which my failed languages—scribbles—get filtered, transmigrated, and transformed."[40] What is remarkable about these observations by Kim Hyesoon and Don Mee Choi about their languages is both the emphasis on being women—being in a woman's body—and the challenge of understandability. Notable is also the emphasis on the materiality of language, it being *fleshy*, as Don Mee Choi describes. This seems particularly fitting considering the rich materiality of her multimedial texts—which, among many other forms of media, involve not only different script (Hangul and Roman script) but also typographical variation and handwritten text. Much more could be said about the links between the languages of both poets. What must be emphasized again here in the present context is that this is not unrelated to Don Mee Choi's understanding of her poetics as (geo)political. What links her writing and work of translation to Kim Hyesoon's poetry is that they are both anti- patriarchal and anti-neocolonial.[41]

From the understanding of recent Korean history and, in Don Mee Choi's terms, its *neocolonial* future as *forgotten*, the relevance of the question of language and of readership reemerges. It might be precisely from a geopolitical perspective that these events are considered "faintly remembered."[42] While, as stated before, the trilogy is written for the most part in English and therefore accessible for a readership on a more global scale, the untranslated phrases or words in Korean might hint at what resists translation—unearthing. Importantly, non-knowledge is central to the outlined hauntological conception of spectrality and haunting. It is therefore interesting that in her exploration of transgenerational haunting in regards to the Korean diaspora in the United States, Grace M. Cho states: "it is not enough to say that the diaspora is transgenerationally haunted by the unspoken traumas of war; it is constituted by that haunting."[43]

To speak of the unspoken and unaddressed in Korean history from a geopolitical perspective would amount to haunting insofar as it evokes the spectral—the "crushed," the "hidden," the "dead yet alive."[44] Kim Hyesoon's idea of *ghost mining* as a process of unearthing further relates to a hauntological conception of mourning. Derrida describes the relevance of knowledge, a metaphorical unearthing of remains, as central to mourning. In his view, knowledge "consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead."[45] He further adds that "one *has to know* who is buried where—and *it is necessary* (to know—to make certain) that, in what remains of him, *he remain there*."[46] In my following close reading of the beginnings of Don Mee Choi's three books, the textual and visual media and their assemblage will be viewed as part of such work—one that is "disobeying history" in order to unearth and converse with what constitutes ghosts.[47]

Spatial and Temporal Returns

> a site of perpetual farewell and return,
> a site of my political act—translation and writing.[48]
> — Don Mee Choi, *Hardly War*

The first sentence of *Hardly War* already hints at the importance of two pairs of aspects which will be considered below through the lens of the hauntological motif of return: firstly, home and origin, and secondly, memory and history. In this first sentence, the speaker says: "I was born in a tiny, traditional, tile-roofed house, a house my father bought with award money he received for his photographs of the April 19, 1960 Revolution."[49] This section will explore the hauntological return to home as a site which foregrounds the onset of a grief and homesickness which come to haunt because a return is ultimately not possible. The prose poem, "RACE = NATION," which the trilogy begins with, already anachronistically foreshadows the hauntological

premises for the speaker regarding her origin. It pinpoints precise historical events (such as the 1960 Revolution, the installment of the presidency of Syngman Rhee in 1948, and the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945) along with biography, yet also expresses a sense of a-temporality: “Even after several decades of living outside of South Korea, this is the house I still return to. It is my psychic and linguistic base, a site of perpetual farewell and return, a site of my political act—translation and writing.”[50]

The perpetuity of return indicates that there is no ultimate return to home. This impossibility to return lies at the basis of the haunting of home which has become the non-place in which the speaker situates her voice and poetics. This urge to return home is formally represented by the various intertextual returns to this non-place until eventually, the speaker in the poem “BRIDGES OF =” in *Mirror Nation* reveals that the actual return is, in fact, no longer possible: “The house I was born in was near the Hangang Bridge. . . . Our house is no longer there, but it persists in my memory. It speaks to me in a language only the homesick understand.”[51] Not only does home appear here as an absence and in memory, but in its absence it also “speaks” and is spectrally animated through the haunting emotion of homesickness. Fittingly, in her sociological theorization of the ghostly, Avery F. Gordon refers to haunting as “those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view.”[52] Of course, the actual home is not only a site of haunting but further alludes to the theoretical intersection between spectrality and the Freudian notion of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), centered on the notion of the home as unfamiliar and estranged. *Das Unheimliche* also underlines the idea that something once familiar, after being repressed, returns in an altered manner.[53]

The haunting impasse of the longing to return home in the face of the impossibility to do so is again addressed in the sequence “SKY TRANSLATION” in *DMZ Colony*, which opens with a drawing of the Korean border and a text about how the demilitarized zone came into

being after World War II. As discussed in the sequence, the notions of return in relation to migration and diaspora are reinforced by the following section which relocates the narrator to Saint Louis, Missouri. The speaker recounts that she is in a park when she hears "a kind of muted, distant calling, a polyphony of cries," which turn out to come from a swarm of snow geese.[54] In chorus, they repeatedly tell her to do the following:

> …return…return…return…return…return…return…
> …return…return…return…return…return…return…
> …return…return…return…return…return…return…[55]

Clearly, the speaker here identifies with these migrating birds at the beginning of *DMZ Colony*, and reflects that "[t]he snow geese must have felt sorry for the homesick sparrow from a faraway place, for they dropped me a line from the sky."[56] The speaker's perception of herself as a "homesick sparrow" underlines the notion of displacement and the longing to return. Indeed, the line "dropped from the sky" appears on the next page—"SEE YOU AT DMZ"—and is echoed by the numerous miniature letters D, M and Z which make up the birds' bodies in their flight on the following pages.[57] As Don Mee Choi herself points out, her language as/and the birds in this instance oppose the border which the DMZ constitutes: "These migrating birds defy borders, including the so-called demilitarized zone across the divided Korean peninsula. By tracing the letters onto snapshots of migrating geese, I was transmigrating D, M, Z and subverting their role in the peninsula."[58]

Through the imagery of bird migration, the speaker at the beginning of *DMZ Colony* returns again to the beginning of her own history: "I grew up in South Korea during the US-backed military dictatorship."[59] This kind of information is repeatedly given throughout the trilogy. Are these repetitions attempts to render comprehensible what unsettles? Or are these repetitions attempts to anachronistically access memories? The speaker then continues to recount the migration of her family from South Korea and the move to Hong Kong in 1972: "In 1983, my family scattered all over. In light, we all were ailing

from separation and homesickness. In light, we had to find a way to settle down, as my mother said. In light, we lived like birds."[60] The separation, homesickness, and scattering described by her through the likening herself to migrating birds underlines the understanding of home as a place which one cannot return to—on the one hand, because her father was convinced "it would be too dangerous for [them] to return home," on the other, because home is portrayed here as a haunting non-space whose loss cannot be successfully mourned.[61] Fittingly, Jinah Kim describes mourning "as occupying a spatiality and temporality of ambivalence because it is not a state that one is supposed to maintain."[62] In the text home is portrayed as a locus of mourning and language, writing in particular, is both a point of contact with what is lost and the medium through which to overcome grief.

The notion of the impossibility of return is also expressed at the beginning of the following sequence from "WINGS OF RETURN," in which the speaker returns to South Korea in 2016 but, in a sense, is herself altered. In the absence of her former self who belonged to this now non-existent home, she "return[s] as a foreigner": "As a foreigner, I understood only the language of wings—the wings on totem animals on old palaces where I used to run around and play. . . . They no longer recognized me in a crowd of other foreigners— tourists, rather. Nevertheless, I went on searching for more wings, my language of return."[63] Spectrality appears here in the form of both anachronism and displacement as a means of countering not only the loss and absence of a home from the past but also of the understanding of self which is no longer there. Hauntologically, she returns as a ghost of her former self. However, the anachronism and displacement here do not only regard the past and present of the speaker but also the future. Indeed, this passage suggests a sense of anticipation in the search for a medium "of return." The speaker perceives language as this medium as it seems to overcome the rift of self that has occurred through time and which determines her loss: she searches for a "language of wings," her "language of return." Interestingly, language is portrayed as a spectral medium which serves the equivocal purpose of conjuration: on the

one hand, the evocation of the absent and the past (as it anticipates a return), and on the other, the exorcism that involves mourning, which attempts to piece together the scattered as a way of coming to terms, or living, with ghosts. As Don Mee Choi's speaker explicitly says, she is in search of such a language. That this search is ultimately work whose conclusion is uncertain is later expressed in "INTERPELLATION OF RETURN" in the book: "The victims of History are permanently exiled from home, within and without. The practitioners of memory are also. We live as foreigners, as translators."[64] Despite the effort and the necessity to rewrite history, to search for *languages of return*, there is no ultimate return to the past without loss and absence. The work of writing, of translating, does not end for her speaker. There is no end to mourning, no end to ghosts.

Conversations Through Time, Through Text

I have no choice but to channel into the desert of memory.[65]
— Don Mee Choi, *Mirror Nation*

The anachronistic sense that there is no end to ghosts is, of course, also mirrored by the national history of Korea. As Grace M. Cho reminds her readers, "the Korean peninsula has been in a state of permanent war since 1950."[66] This timelessness of what can be understood as a form of haunting which impacts personal as well as collective histories in Don Mee Choi's trilogy is also expressed through occurrences of intertextual references throughout the three books. One example of such an intertextual return presents the twofold narration of the same night from two different perspectives, seventy years apart. The text "1950 JUNE 28: THE FALL OF SEOUL" recounts the invasion of Seoul by North Korean troops, which resulted in the decision of the U.S. to intervene in the Korean War. As the note at the end of *Hardly War* reveals, the title of the poem refers to "[l]ines from [her] father's writing about the first few months of the Korean War."[67] Interestingly, the endnotes in all three books make the reader return to what they have

already read before. Accordingly, the perspective presented in this poem is the persona of the father, who formulates the question, "Are you OK, ROK?"[68] This question is not only repeated later in *Hardly War* (namely in "NEOCOLONY'S COLONY"), but more importantly in the poem that the third book of the trilogy, *Mirror Nation*, opens with.[69] In the poem "BERLIN 28.6.2019," in which the title already hints at the parallelism between the two texts, yet another speaker asks the same question. This process of mirroring (as the title of the third book also indicates) and the intertextual return to the beginning of the trilogy are presented through different aspects which underline the motif of return.

While on the level of content the past of family and national history are narrated from two different perspectives, formally this intertextual return is marked by the use of similar imagery, repetitions, quotations, and parallelisms. Further, both "BERLIN 28.6.2019" and "1950 JUNE 28: THE FALL OF SEOUL" describe the evocation of a non-present presence and therefore seek to communicate with absences. The second book is also invoked intertextually, as when the speaker says, "[o]nly the fences remind me of home—the endless barbed wire across the waist of a nation."[70] This description of the Korean border as "the waist of a nation" is also the first line (or headline) in *DMZ Colony*'s "SKY TRANSLATION."[71] Although, the third book, *Mirror Nation*, starts with a new location and point in time within the trilogy, "BERLIN 28.6.2019" nevertheless refers back to the same date in 1950 in Seoul which is recounted in the beginning of *Hardly War*. In fact, one can read it as a re-writing of "1950 JUNE 28: THE FALL OF SEOUL," which portrays the persona of the father as he "washed [his] face in the yard and looked up at the stars" on the night that North Korean troops marched into Seoul.[72] That Don Mee Choi's own speaker returns to this memory in "BERLIN 28.6.2019" is made explicit in the following: "On 28.6.1950, in Seoul, three days after the war had begun, my father washed his face and looked up the stars on a clear night, then decided to head out to the city center."[73] These repetitions in "1950 JUNE 28: THE FALL OF SEOUL" and "BERLIN 28.6.2019" are evocations of memory; in the first, the speaker imagines the memory of her father,

and in the second, her persona evokes both her own and his memory, seeking a conversation between them.

Further, the use of star imagery also connects these texts. In *Mirror Nation*, "[l]ike a compass," or like a star, "the ever-spinning ring of Mercedes-Benz" in Berlin of 2019 allows the speaker to "detect the exact location."[74] Similar star imagery also pervades the first text of the trilogy. Not only did the father persona in the Seoul of 1950 perceive that "[t]he tracks shone under the stars," it is also the star imagery which marks the interweaving of geopolitical history.[75] The speaker recounts, for instance, the red star on the "Russian made tank" and watches it "pass by, shitting more stars from its behind."[76] Of course, both the North Korean and the American flag feature one or more red stars. The logo of Mercedes-Benz also somewhat resembles the peace sign originally designed for the British nuclear disarmament movement in 1958. However, Mercedes-Benz is a successful brand on the global capitalist market. Stars in general symbolize fate, eternity, and determinism. Don Mee Choi indeed explains the role of the Mercedes-Benz ring in a further development in *Mirror Nation* as follows: "the spinning ring transmigrates into the larger narrative of the violence of global history, transforming into a ring of O that transmits my father's war memories."[77] Personal history and memory are anachronistically interwoven with global history and geopolitics.

The geopolitical dimension of Don Mee Choi's poetics in evoking and re-writing the past is thereby made explicit in these two poems by the entanglement of different national histories in regard to power relations and the collective trauma of war. Indeed, against the backdrop of the perpetual military command of the U.S. over South Korea, she situates her anti-neocolonial and geopolitical poetics: "But my tongue deforms, it disobeys. I translate this longing, entangled with neocolonial dependency, as homesickness, which is a form of illness, a form of intensity."[78] This again underlines that the work of writing and translation and, for what concerns her trilogy, of evoking and re-writing historical narratives carries a political motivation. Such anachronistic intervention into hegemonial historiography, an intervention which necessarily involves ghosts, is always a political act:

"[h]egemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony."[79] If there is exorcism at work in Don Mee Choi's *ghost mining*, it is an exorcism which does not seek to banish the ghosts it evokes, but rather, an exorcism that counters the haunting *confirmed* by hegemonically determined practices in history writing, memorializing, and forgetting. The fact that in "BERLIN 28.6.2019" the speaker refers to Berlin as her "future city of two Koreas" emphasizes how through her writing, she anachronistically weaves together the past, present, and possible future of both her personal history and collective national histories.[80] This can be read as an attempt, in the words of Derrida, "to learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship."[81]

This attempt at *learning to live with ghosts* is expressed further in relation to two processes of sense-making, grief and translation, within the same poem in *Mirror Nation*:

> This inexplicable ailment, which began in Hong Kong when we left South Korea during the dictatorship, had magnified over the years, then it had somewhat subsided the past twenty years as I settled, often numbing myself with work involving translation after translation. The unexpected return of my childhood grief prompted me to search for the remote waves of my father, my other universe.[82]

The repeated question "Are you OK, ROK," which the personae in both texts ("1950 JUNE 28: THE FALL OF SEOUL" and "BERLIN 28.6.2019") ask, suggests that each persona seeks to converse with an absent non-presence despite temporal disjuncture. Indeed, Don Mee Choi describes grief as a "portal to juxtapose and overlap time and memory. What happens to time when 'so many points' converge?"[83] Grief, therefore, offers an opportunity for expression, a "portal" for untimely communication. In her texts, this anachronistic conversation is made possible through writing and all other materials which are part of it: "I channeled all other materials—photos, personal and historical archival

documents—into the portal of grief and watched them blow in closer and closer."[84]

Further, this anachronistic conversation is expressed by the parallelisms which mark the identification, or conjuring, of the absent father persona by Don Mee Choi's speaker. As much as he "merely merrily washed" his face in her evocation of his memories of Seoul in 1950, her persona in the later text set in the future Berlin also says: "I merely merrily washed my face and looked out to the ring of Benz lit at dawn, and finally caught a strand of remote signal from my father."[85] Hence, in this later poem, the father persona indeed portrays a non-present presence which she addresses through her writing and through remembrance: "As my father did seventy years ago to his unborn daughter, I channeled into the most remote canyons of the desert—Are you OK, ROK? I'm childless, so I have no choice but to channel into the desert of memory."[86] This process of reaching out "into the desert of memory" as an attempt to communicate with the non-living—"the unborn daughter" and "the desert of memory"—can therefore be read as an attempt at spectral communication, an attempt at conjuring the absent. Importantly, this conversing and connecting through time is only possible through the medium of language. In accordance, Derrida remarks that "one cannot speak of generations of skulls or spirits except on the condition of language—and the voice."[87] This conversation between spectral non-presences can only take place in the anachronistic non-space of memory. In the world of her poetry, however, such conversing is made possible through language, as, at the end of "BERLIN 28.6.2019," the father persona answers from that spectral nowhere: "My father waved to me across a vast distance, from his present dimension: We are still not OK!"[88]

Hauntological Literature

Literature enjoys its own internal hauntology. [89]
— Katy Shaw, *Hauntology*

The dynamics of haunting and spectrality in literature do not require the actual appearance of ghosts within a text. Haunting can take the form of anachronism, of infinite grief and impossible mourning. In Don Mee Choi's poetry, return is not possible without loss and absence. The home and the former understanding of self that are no more can only be evoked in memory and through the medium of language. In that context, what or who is evoked and returned inherently occupies a spectral position. What is hauntological about the books is not only their thematic engagement with spectral anachronism, history, and grief-work, but also aspects of their formal composition, where intertextual returns and repetitions mirror the anticipation of the returning ghost. As Katy Shaw fittingly remarks:

> Literature enjoys its own internal hauntology, both in the multi-faceted capacity of language to carry a multitude of meanings, the power of intertextuality to communicate from beyond the confines of the immediate text and in the power of literary testimony to communicate unheard voices and unspoken perspectives.[90]

The ghost of the unresolved and the unspoken-of, the ghost as a *revenant*, who cannot be situated in any fixed temporal or spatial point and whose return must therefore be anticipated, is a figure which demands to be addressed and lived with.

Indeed, as Derrida writes, "being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations."[91] Being in contact with the spectral implies communicative exchange and an ethical dimension. For the context of Korean history which regards Don Mee Choi's trilogy, Grace M. Cho argues: "The bodies of diaspora, and particularly the Korean diaspora, are constituted by unremembered trauma and loss. When an

unspeakable or uncertain history, both personal and collective, takes the form of a 'ghost,' it searches for bodies through which to speak."[92] The personae in *Hardly War*, *DMZ Colony*, and *Mirror Nation* can be regarded as textual instances that give voice to the absent in history, and which, in their anticipation to return, occupy spectral states. Again, these texts emphasize the communicative quality of any engagement with the spectral and the process of unearthing, of *mining ghosts* which is intrinsic in the poetics that Kim Hyesoon describes. Adequately, Katy Shaw emphasizes that "[i]n any encounter with the specter, lines of communication are not linear, but profoundly dialogic. We do not merely 'receive' the specter; we must enter into an act of engagement with it."[93] In fact, the necessity to actively engage with the spectral hints at the question of the ethical responsibility we have towards what occupies spectral states.

This, again, underlines the decisively ethical dimension of Don Mee Choi's geopolitical poetics which motivates her return to and rewriting of those kinds of histories which are marked, if not haunted, by forgetting or unresolved grief and loss. As expressed before, it also highlights the dynamics of power at work in the writing of historical narratives, in determining what knowledge is to be remembered and forgotten. Likewise, Avery Gordon understands haunting as "one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with or when their oppressive nature is denied[.]"[94] According to the premises of Derridean hauntology, what is collectively remembered—or forgotten—also determines what comes back to haunt, since haunting would be inherent in the hegemonic practices which determine the writing of history.[95] What is metaphorically unearthed in her trilogy is the absent in such narratives, and therefore, what must be written, rewritten, and translated. As Derrida notes, "[b]y definition, the missing resist the work of mourning. . . . The missing of the archive, the ghost, the phantom—that's the future."[96] What Don Mee Choi's trilogy accomplishes then in her *mining of ghosts* can indeed be regarded as a spectral archive which serves as a non-space for conversation and rewriting. The

interrelation between knowledge and remembrance in history and the potency of writing is therefore decisive for understanding the spectrality at work in Don Mee Choi's trilogy. Her poetics is at once geopolitical and spectral—a poetics of conjuration.

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Editor's Note

Our journal follows the *Chicago Manual of Style*, according to which authors' names appear in full only in the first mention. Here, however, the author's request to use full names throughout has been respected.

Notes

[1] Kim Hyesoon, *Tongueless Mother Tongue* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2023), 27.

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 10.

[3] Don Mee Choi is referred to as an “unapologetically experimental writer” in Daniel Y. Kim, “Hardly Emotion: The Minor Feelings of US Empire and the Translational Poetics of Don Mee Choi,” *American Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2022): 665. The second book of Choi’s trilogy, *DMZ Colony*, is described as “an unclassifiable text” in Simon Shieh, “*DMZ COLONY* AND THE TOTALITARIAN TRANSLATOR,” *The American Poetry Review* 52, no. 3 (2023): 7.

[4] This article was presented as a shortened version at the 2024 *Situations* International Conference under the theme *Asian Diaspora in the 21st Century*: *Transnational Hauntology and Affective Production*. Since I am neither Asian nor part of a diaspora, I do not want to claim that I can speak for the theme in the first part of the conference title. My reading of Don Mee Choi’s trilogy is motivated by my research interest in what I consider to be hauntological forms in anglophone literature. As I am also not a scholar of Korean studies, my interpretation of the text is necessarily partial and shaped by my positionality. I am conscious that my perspective does not account for the lived experiences embedded in the works.

[5] Don Mee Choi, *Hardly War* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2016), 4.

[6] Derrida, *Specters*, 11.

[7] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 31.

[8] Derrida, *Specters*, 10.

[9] Ibid., 3.

[10] Katy Shaw, *Hauntology*: *The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 7.

[11] Derrida, *Specters*, 11

[12] Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 18.

[13] Pierre Macherey, “Marx Dematerialised, or the Spirit of Derrida,” in *Ghostly Demarcations*: *A Symposium on Jacques Derrida*’s ‘*Specters of Marx*’, ed. Michael Sprinkler (London: Verso, 1999), 18.

[14] Choi, *Hardly War*, 4.

[15] Ibid.; Kim, *Tongueless Mother Tongue*, 27.

[16] Shaw, 6.

[17] Derrida, *Specters*, 58. For a lengthy discussion on the equivocal conception of the dynamics of conjuration, see *Specters*, 49–60.

[18] Ibid., xvii–xviii.

[19] Ibid., xviii.

[20] Choi, *Hardly War*, 4.

[21] Don Mee Choi refers to her family history and their migration in several instances in the trilogy and in other published texts and talks (for instance, see Choi, *Hardly War*, 3). See also the published letter exchange between Don Mee Choi and Christian Hawkey, "DON MEE CHOI and CHRISTIAN HAWKEY," *BOMB*, no. 142 (2017–2018): 104–10.

[22] The characterization of the Korean War as a "forgotten war" stems from *Korea: The Forgotten War*, directed by Don Horan, 1987. Choi explains her understanding of South Korea as a "neocolony" of the U.S. in her pamphlet on translation, Don Mee Choi, *Translation is a Mode=Translation is an Anti-neocolonial Mode* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2020).

[23] See *Korea*: *The Forgotten War*, directed by Don Horan, 1987 and Choi, *Hardly War*, 91.

[24] Daniel Y. Kim, *The Intimacies of Conflict*: *Cultural Memory and the Korean War* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 2, 4. In the same book, Kim outlines a comprehensive historical overview of the Korean War as it is commonly understood in contrast to a more nuanced perspective which highlights the "inadequacy of the temporal markers of 1950–53," 19. See Kim, *The Intimacies*, 16–19.

[25] Cho, 11.

[26] Crystal Mun-hye Baik, *Reencounters*: *On the Korean war and Diasporic Memory Critique* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020), 16. Also see, 10–21.

[27] See Don Mee Choi, *DMZ Colony* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2020), 13–36; Choi, *Hardly War*, 3–4.

[28] Choi, *DMZ Colony*, 15; *Hardly War*, 3.

[29] In *Tongueless*, Kim Hyesoon writes of the censorship she witnessed while working for a publishing company: "Towards the end of the Yushin Constitution, I started working at a publishing house in Korea. During the last days of the dictatorial regime, all newspapers, books, and magazines were subject to government censorship," 23. See also Choi, *DMZ Colony*, 15.

[30] Choi, *DMZ Colony*, 16.

[31] Choi and Hawkey, 106.

[32] Of course, the history of migration and the evolvement of contemporary Korean diaspora is more complex than this. While a detailed outline would go beyond the scope of this article, relevant historical cornerstones are as follows: one could say that in the twentieth century, the colonial occupation by Japan caused the onset of migration and re-migration of Koreans mainly to Japan and Manchuria. As indicated above, migration during the Cold War was very much impacted by the Korean War, later changing migration politics in the 1960s. What has been conceived of as a second wave of migration, mainly to the U.S., from 1950 to the mid-60s, was largely constituted by Korean women (so-called "war brides"), orphans, and students. What contributed to further migration, also to other countries in Europe

or South America for instance, was the promotion of international migration in 1962 (which the government benefited from by sending guestworkers and soldiers, such as the Korean soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War) and the legislative changes in both Korean and American law which facilitated migration. Since then, migration has steadily increased, and the industrialization and global integration of South Korea in the 1990s has resulted in the Korean diaspora community comprising of about 7.08 million people as of 2023. For reference, see Overseas Koreans Agency, "Total Status of Overseas Koreans as of 2023 [재외동포 현황 총계 2023년 기준]," accessed October 15, 2024, https://www.oka.go.kr/web/content.do?menu_cd=000101. Nowadays, return migration back to South Korea is common, which complicates binary notions of diaspora and home. For general outlines of these historical developments see Joanne Miyang Cho and Lee M. Roberts, "Transnationalism, Migration, Historiography, and Organization," in *Transnationalism and Migration in Global Korea*, eds. Joanne Miyang Cho, Lee M. Roberts and Sang Hwan Seong (New York: Routledge, 2023), 1–27; Takeyuki Tsuda, "Korean Diasporic Returns," in *Diasporic Returns to the Ethnic Homeland*, eds. Tajeyuki Tsuda and Changzoo Song (Cham: Springer, 2019), 3–16. For an overview of colonial era migration see Jaeeun Kim, "The making and unmaking of a 'transborder nation': South Korea during and after the Cold War," *Theory and Society* 38, no. 2 (2009): 133–64. For more on return migration see Ji-Yeon O. Jo, *Homing*: *An Affective Topography of Ethnic Korean Return Migration* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017).

[33] Choi, *Translation*, 2.

[34] Ibid., 5.

[35] For an outline of the entanglement between language and identity in the backdrop of Korea's colonial past, see Young-Key Kim-Renaud, "Korean Language, Power, and National Identity," in *The Two Koreas and Their Global Engagements*, ed. Andrew David Jackson (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 187–222.

[36] Ibid., 188.

[37] Choi, *Translation*, 5.

[38] Kim Hyesoon and Don Mee Choi, "Korean Women—Poetry, Identity, Place: A Conversation with Kim Hye-sun," *positions*, 11, no. 3 (2003): 538.

[39] Don Mee Choi, "Translating Back to Empire: An Interview with Don Mee Choi," by Gabriela Denise Frank, *Chicago Review* 68, no. 1 (2025): 23.

[40] Ibid., 24.

[41] More precisely, Don Mee Choi herself expresses this as follows: "I understand Kim's poetry as poetry written under patriarchy and the neocolonial condition, speaking back to power and empire. Translation enables me to be an intimate part of speaking back to empire—through Kim's poetry as well as mine" (Ibid., 27).

[42] Choi, *Hardly War*, 4.

[43] Cho, 12.

[44] Kim, *Tongueless Mother Tongue*, 27.

[45] Derrida, *Specters*, 9.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Choi, *Hardly War*, 4.

[48] Ibid., 3.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Don Mee Choi, *Mirror Nation* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2024), 11.

[52] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvi.

[53] Indeed, according to Freud, the uncanny "is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar." See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 124.

[54] Choi, *DMZ Colony*, 6.

[55] Ibid., 7.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 8–11.

[58] Choi, "Translating Back to Empire," 25.

[59] Ibid., 15.

[60] Ibid., 17.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Jinah Kim, *Postcolonial Grief*: *The Afterlives of the Pacific Wars in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 9.

[63] Ibid., 18. See also Sohini Basak, "Another Mode of Writing: Don Mee Choi in Conversation," *Wasafiri* 40, no.1 (2025): 35–42.

[64] Choi, *DMZ Colony*, 88.

[65] Choi, *Mirror Nation*, 2.

[66] Cho, 20.

[67] Choi, *Hardly War*, 91.

[68] Ibid., 11.

[69] Ibid., 45; Choi, *Mirror Nation*, 2.

[70] Choi, *Mirror Nation*, 2.

[71] Choi, *DMZ Colony*, 5.

[72] Choi, *Hardly War*, 11.

[73] Choi, *Mirror Nation*, 2.

[74] Ibid., 2, 3.

[75] Choi, *Hardly War*, 11.

[76] Ibid., 12.

[77] Choi, "Translating Back to Empire," 25.

[78] Choi, *Translation*, 8.

[79] Derrida, *Specters*, 46.
[80] Choi, *Mirror Nation*, 3.
[81] Derrida, *Specters*, xvii–xviii.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Choi, "Translating Back to Empire," 26.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Choi, *Hardly War*, 11; Choi, *Mirror Nation*, 2.
[86] Choi, *Mirror Nation*, 2.
[87] Derrida, *Specters*, 9.
[88] Choi, *Mirror Nation*, 3.
[89] Shaw, 15.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Derrida, *Specters*, xviii.
[92] Cho, 40.
[93] Shaw, 11.
[94] Gordon, xvi.
[95] See again Derrida, *Specters*, 46.
[96] Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 189

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