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9. Body Burdens: The Materiality of Work in Rita Wong's *forage*

*water connects us to salmon & cedar, whales & workers ...
a gyre of karma recirculates, burgeoning body burden*

Rita Wong's work is fundamentally concerned with exploring and exposing the entanglement of economic, subjective and ecological exploitation. Wong is an Asian Canadian writer who, as a critic, has addressed theories of work and labour, both in regards to Asian racialization and labour in literature, and the 'work' of the writer within and against capitalism.¹ This chapter, however, focuses on Wong's poetry, specifically her 2007 collection *forage*. Much of the poetry collected in *forage* addresses the social and environmental injustices of global capitalism by following the disguised and mystified routes of supply chains to reveal the materiality of work. The forms and techniques of Wong's poetry—including ruptured lyric, found text, open field poetics and citation—reveal the movement of materials around the world, at the same time as they attend to the experiences of migrant and indentured workers exposed to noxious materials and degraded environments. Before poetry is discussed, however, it is necessary to introduce the theories of transcorporeality and slow violence. This theoretical framework will help reveal how Wong's poetry advances a new way of seeing work and exposing capitalist complicity in human suffering and environmental damage by making visible the materiality of labour exchange. Materiality emerges as a fundamental consideration in any theory of work, proposing a counter-narrative to theories of full automation, deterritorialisation and dematerialisation.

Toxicity: the current crisis and theoretical approaches

In his 1989 essay, *The Three Ecologies*, Felix Guattari addressed the conditions of integrated world capitalism as socially, subjectively, and ecologically devastating.² A few years later, the Nigerian poet and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa defined oil extraction by Shell in the Niger Delta as an "ecological war," simultaneously attacking the culture, health, social organisation, livelihood and land of the Ogoni peoples.³ These insights from distinct theoretical and activist perspectives summarise the foundations of the environmental justice movement: the state of nature and the state of humanity are not in binary or tangential relation, but are fundamentally interwoven and interdependent.

More recent approaches have insisted upon the absolute integrity and interconnectedness of human (cultural, economic, social) and natural processes. Timothy Morton's 'ecological thought' exemplifies such thinking: everything is interconnected, and the constructions of 'cultural' and 'natural' must be rejected in order to reach a more holistic understanding of ecological interdependence. Morton states that "[t]he ecological crisis we face is so obvious that it becomes easy—for some, strangely or frighteningly easy—to join up the dots and see everything is interconnected. This is *the ecological thought*. And the more we consider it, the more

our world opens up.”⁴ Morton establishes the ‘mesh’ as the most appropriate way of conceiving of these interconnections, adapted from the Hindu model of Indra’s Net: “The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. [...] Nothing exists by itself, so nothing is fully “itself.””⁵ Ecological thinking and ‘the mesh’ forces a re-examination of human exceptionalism and human-nature binaries. Instead of privileging either anthropocentric or ecocentric values, human health must be seen as an environmental concern, and environmental flourishing as fundamental to human health.⁶ Most importantly, environmental justice emerges as one of the key stakes in the confrontation between capitalism and indigenous people, the poor, and low-skilled workers, all of whom are disproportionately affected by environmental issues from climate change to resource conflict, toxic dumping to chemical industries.

The racial, ethnic, gendered, and class dimension of environmental risk are written large across the globe. They have been addressed in scholarship concerned with exposing the interdependence of social, economic and environmental justice. In *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo notes how in North America, “exposure to toxins correlates most directly with race, and then with class, as toxic waste sites, factories, and other sources are most often located near the neighbourhoods of African Americans or other people of colour.”⁷ A small selection of high-profile and ongoing conflicts can be called on to demonstrate the ubiquity of what Alaimo refers to, including: the state of water emergency in Flint, Michigan, where lead-poisoned water is, at the time of writing, still being supplied to predominantly African American communities; in the Athabasca watershed of Alberta, Canada, where First Nation communities experience high levels of rare cancers and autoimmune diseases associated with tar sands extraction; and in the monumental struggle between indigenous activists and the corporate group, supported by the US government, behind the Dakota Access Pipeline.

On a global scale, flows and movements of resources, people, capital, water and toxins are inextricably intertwined. Raw materials are extracted in regions defined, problematically, as ‘developing’ or ‘Third World’; they are then processed and manufactured cheaply in nations with lower degrees of industrial and economic autonomy and environmental regulation than the West; next they are imported as high-end goods to wealthy Western nations. At the end of the supply chain, toxic materials return to Third World countries from an array of industries, in particular electronics, leaching into water and impacting on the health of workers, residents, animals and ecosystems. The Blacksmith Institute currently identifies 3,241 toxic sites in low and middle income countries, affecting around 54 million people.⁸

In some cases, the catastrophic incidents which expose poor communities to toxins are devastatingly visible. Such is the case of the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy, in which an accident at the Union Carbide Factory led to over 500,000 people living in shanty towns around the site being exposed to deadly methyl isocyanate. More difficult to make visible are the long-term human health and ecosystem implications of leaching toxic materials, from disasters like Bhopal, or from industrial practices more globally. As Jennifer Beth Spiegel notes, ongoing protests by survivors in Bhopal are deeply concerned with the politics of visibility. Activities include marches to deliver collections of urine to government buildings, led by local mothers who

attempt to “[alter] the power dynamics relating to the way biochemical flows become publicly visible.”⁹

Precarious migrant workforces also accompany flows of raw and processed materials around the world. As Vandana Shiva notes, neocolonial practices ensure that nature, matter and humanity are all treated as raw materials for the appropriation of capital: “it is the Third World’s biodiversity and human diversity that is being pirated by Northern corporations.”¹⁰ These workers’ lives and bodies are shaped and imprinted by their labour, for example through chemical injury sustained in work that involves exposure to noxious substances, or by living on land which bears the burden of resource extraction, dangerous manufacturing practices, and toxic dumping. However, Western theorists have been slow to address materiality in theories of economics and labour. Coole and Frost note how “[a]mong social theorists it has become fashionable to talk about deterritorialized, dematerialized capital flows,” but immediate and long-term material affects accompany any interruption or crash in financial markets, while flows of capital are paralleled by flows of toxins in and raw materials out of areas subject to processes of Third Worldization.¹¹

Toxicity and environmental pollution demand reconceptualisations of agency, materiality and violence, as well as a renewed politics capable of addressing issues played out across deep temporal and planetary scales, and across different cultures, nations, language traditions and land-masses.¹² Two key concepts are, however, particularly useful in understanding the materiality of labour and examining its representations of work in Wong’s poetry. Firstly, ‘slow violence’ as defined by Rob Nixon will assist in considering distributed forms of responsibility and harm as they are played out over generations and across multiple and long distances. Slow violence is “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction [...] incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.”¹³ Slow violence is a particularly appropriate lens to adopt in analysis of Wong’s representations of work. The forms of Third World labour that she addresses—manufacturing, mining, waste disposal, electronics recycling—often do cause harm in devastating accidents. More difficult to perceive, however, are the forms of violence which are gradual and accretive, and whose moment of origin can be difficult to determine. Even in the UK and North America, where employees enjoy relatively expansive workplace rights and stringent health and safety protection, medico-legal insurance policies are geared against awarding damages to workers who suffer from diseases and disorders connected to long-term or life-long working conditions. Beyond the life-changing injury, there is a need to adjust perceptions of damage within occupational health and environmental management. Slow violence provides a means of pinpointing the brutality of the tumours, birth defects, sullied waterways—into which pesticides leach at “a tenth of a mile in a day”¹⁴—and other “body burdens” experienced by the world’s poor, and addressed in poetry by Wong.¹⁵ Slow violence helps reconnect human agency and responsibility with injuries seemingly distant in space and time.

The second key concept, transcorporeality, describes the movement of materials between bodies, gesturing towards our own materiality and continuity with the physical world. Stacy Alaimo, who coined the term, states: “trans-corporeality

suggests that humans are not only interconnected with each other but with the material flows of substances and places.”¹⁶ Carried by water, air, food and other means of influx: “matter flows through bodies, substantially recomposing them in the process.”¹⁷ Transcorporeality is transgression because it challenges subject/object relations and binaries of self/other, human/environment and inside/outside on which modern individualistic classifications of personhood and the human rest. Awareness that the human body is material and transcorporeal demands reconsideration of environmental crisis as well as the body burden of labour; as Alaimo puts it: “Humans are vulnerable because they are not in fact ‘human’ in some transcendent, contained sense, but are flesh, substance, matter.”¹⁸

Ecopoetry and Wong’s Poetics

Themes of slow violence and transcorporeality can be seen across Wong’s poetry, and particularly so in her representations of work. The formal and linguistic innovation of Wong’s writing exposes the movement of material around the globe, at the same time as it attends to the experiences of workers who are subjected to the damage of labour in sickening bodies and degraded environments. To this extent, she participates in a modernist ecopoetic project to reject and innovate beyond pastoral and Romantic constructions of nature and to challenge a Western cultural imaginary that understands *time* in terms of efficiency, *place* in terms of property relations, and *nature* in terms of multiply interlocking and destructive binaries: feminine, raw, passive, primitive, innocent, Other, and ripe for exploitation. Linguistic innovation and formal experimentation is particularly appropriate in ecopoetry because, it is asserted, it may help denaturalise the language of ‘nature,’ reveal nature-culture interdependencies, and model ecological relations in new ways. According to Lynn Keller “experimental poetics [...] might be helping shift our sense of human/nonhuman relations away from the anthropocentric and might enhance our sense of kinship and interdependence with other life forms.”¹⁹

Modernist poetics has proved to be influential on ecological theory as well. Morton describes ecology as “more like a Mallarmé poem than a linear, syntactically organized, unified work. The words spread out on the page: we can’t tell whether to read them from left to right, nor can we tell which words go with which.”²⁰ Stacy Alaimo developed transcorporeality in part through analysis of Muriel Rukeyser’s 1938 modernist long-poem *The Book of the Dead*. In it, Rukeyser exposes the interconnection between systemic racism and disease during the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel industrial disaster, in which a workforce of predominantly African-American miners were exposed to fatal levels of silica whilst carving out a new hydroelectric dam. Modernist literary techniques were used and developed by Rukeyser to reveal the unseen hazards of mining: these include found text (from court transcripts), mixed registers and voice (scientific language interspersed with lyrical testimony), and multiple, discordant framing devices and points of view, including X-Rays, technical photography, and perspectives associated with landscape painting. As *The Book of the Dead* reveals, workers at Hawk’s Nest were exploited not just subjectively and economically, but materially, as they bear the toxic burden of their labour in the

sickening body.²¹

Like Rukeyser's, Wong's poetry advances the project of making the materiality of labour visible. In a manifesto-poem from her 2015 water-themed collection *Undercurrent* she states:

water connects us to salmon & cedar, whales & workers
its currents bearing the plastic from our fridges & closets
a gyre of karma recirculates, burgeoning body burden.²²

Employing notions of transcorporeality, this excerpt emphasises human and non-human entanglement. It attempts to overcome limitations on perceiving relations across vast spatial and temporal scales through the endlessly cycling medium of water. It also addresses ecological enmeshment in the movement of matter through natural processes, in this case, the ocean gyre in which the Great Pacific Garbage patch has collected.

Bringing such relations of exploitation to light may be seen to constitute the 'work' of the poet. However, at the same time as she commits herself and her poetics to revealing the misuses and abuses of industrial capitalism, Wong is alert to the limitations of lyric and the ethical problems with evoking empathy as a political gesture. This paradox is at the heart of *forage*, which the rest of this chapter will now address. In the balancing act between situated lyric and writing that foregrounds material relations over individual experience, the figure of the Chinese migrant—both in nineteenth and twentieth century North American settlement, and the contemporary industrial worker—recurs as a motif and a rallying cry. These are the bodies that bear the burden of capitalism: culturally, spiritually and materially. How, Wong asks in *forage*, can the poet evoke this worker and demonstrate solidarity without participating in the same Western fantasies which make real workers distant, other and theoretical?

Form and Connectivity

forage is comprised of many short poems of mostly a page or two; some are organised as tightly constructed blocks of text, some are organised across two pages in open form style, and others are composed of fragmentary sentences with a full line space in-between. Many poems are also surrounded by handwritten text that coils around the poems' margins. In the printed, page-centred text, each formal choice contributes in distinct ways to the collection's overall themes. In the poem "fester," the word "trade" is placed in proximity to "traitor," implying a relationship between the two, while the compression of words in the line "sweatshoparoundyourthroat" emphasises the experience of entrapment in a class and labour position which is felt as a direct attack on the body

Many other poems are arranged as collections of spaced-out sentences, including "value chain," "mess is lore" and "forage, fumage." This form is suggestive of a cut-up composition process. Fragments in different voices and registers are slotted next to one another, proving resistant to both enjambment and any run-on

reading, for example:

the internal frontier: my consumer patterns

what is the context for “you people are hard workers?”

electromagnetic fields of refrigerator, phone & computer hum
bewildered static²³

Lines are not, however, to be read in isolation. They can be held in parallel associations: above, for example, Wong’s speaker reflects on her own consumption, presumably including electronics (referred to two entries down), between which is an attempt to make sense of a restated racist stereotype of the hard-working Asian (perhaps both the wealthy tech-savvy descendent of migrants in North America, and the immiserated industrial worker in China). While no ultimate synthesis of meaning or context can be reached, accepting a disguised relation between the fragments urges the kinds of thinking necessary for the ecological thought, in which only traces and fragments of more complex interconnectivity can be seen.

Many of the ‘run-on block of text’ poems emphasise transcorporeality and entanglement, at the same time as they demonstrate the difficulties of perceiving flows through disjunctive phrasing and harsh enjambment. In the poem “fluorine,” agencies designated as human, animal, natural and material pursue diverse intentions in work, consumption, life-patterns and in the global cycles of the hydrological system:

arsenic in calculators, mercury in felt
hats, mad as a poisoned hatter
pyrophoric undercurrent in mundane
acts assume poison unless otherwise
informed crowded alloys detect no

Chemical flows connect bodies and ecosystems through water. As the opening lines suggest, toxic mercury and arsenic are emitted routinely in the energy market, particular in China, and are used in the production of everyday objects, building up in aquatic systems and in the bodies of higher-level species, due to biomagnification.²⁴ Toxic release into aquatic systems produces immediate health and environmental disasters at the point of release—as in Minamata Disaster of 1956—and more long-term effects both locally and in distant bodies and places. The non-standard grammar and fit-start enjambment throughout alludes to processes without containment, while anacoluthon—change of syntax mid-flow—alludes to the moment that human control of industrial chemicals is lost as they enter geological and ecological systems.

Towards the second half of “fluorine,” a lyric ‘I’ of sorts is asserted. Wong notes how no health damage is detected

[...] until generations later i
brush my teeth with nuclear intensity

the cavities i avoid destined for others
fall into hazardous-waste piles up as
i sleep smells though i don't see it
transported across oceans & into sad
rural neglect [...] ²⁵

Whilst emphasising the collective nature of this daily chore and the paradoxical minuteness of brushing one's teeth, the emergence of a small "I" places some responsibility on the speaker. Collapsing commonsense notions of scale and responsibility, the poem makes materiality visible. The tooth-cavity that the speaker avoids is transplanted elsewhere. Accretive toxic burden builds up in the water system, contributing, Wong implies, to cancerous manifestations and long-term chronic health problems.

Body Burdens

The phrase 'body burden' appears in both *forage* and *Undercurrent*. In this phrase Wong alludes to a fundamental problem with the labour contract model under toxic working conditions. The labour contract emerges in the context of social contract theory derived from Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Labour contracts are based on the premise that individuals are free to contract their labour, and thus to enter into agreed conditions of servility and become, for the purposes of work, the property of another. In *The Sexual Contract*, Carole Pateman critiques the foundations of Locke's contract by revealing the ways in which the labour contract is premised upon forms of self-denigration which, within the theory of contract itself, it is beyond the worker to contract away. This is because no one can fully contract away their own rights to life and liberty, because to do so would destroy the 'free' terms of the contract itself. At the heart of Pateman's critique—which touches upon slavery, marriage and sex work—is a resistance to all forms of labour contracts for the reason that, due to differentiations of power between the buyer and the seller of labour, they always exceed their own terms.²⁶ Marxist and feminist theorists concerned with labour have further addressed the additional forms of affective and emotion labour demanded by employees and consumers, beyond traditional models of disembodied, genderless and machinic models of worker productivity.²⁷ Wong's poetry contributes to existing critiques of the labour contract by revealing bodies materially burdened by work. The bodies that "inhale carcinogenic toner dust" and the "disposable factory girls" of Wong's poetry are not liberated by their work;²⁸ they have been forced into the paradoxical position of contracting away their health and physical integrity as if they had entered into a 'normal' work contract.²⁹ The toxicity of modern labour, and the forms of slow violence enacted over decades and generations, adds an essential dimension to critiques of the labour contract.

Wong's commitment to making obscured global networks of relations and responsibilities visible involves following links of material connections from the privileged Western consumer to the burdened bodies of workers. In "after 'Laundry Song' by Wen I'to", Wong updates older Chinese literatures of work to address the

body burden of modern labour. According to Renqui Yu, in 1888 there were around 10,000 Chinese people living in New York and around 2,000 Chinese laundries.³⁰ The hand-laundries offered opportunities for occupation outside of factory work, at a time when Chinese workers were denied employment due to prejudice and the limitations on rights to work enshrined in the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). In spite of the higher degree of autonomy these small-business owners achieved, hand-laundry work was exhausting and poorly paid. Wen I'to's "Laundry Song," after which Wong's poem is named, was written in 1926. Here is a short excerpt:

I can wash handkerchiefs wet with sad tears;
I can wash shirts soiled in sinful crimes.
The grease of greed, the dirt of desire ...
And all the filthy things at your house,
Give them to me to wash, give them to me.³¹

Hand-laundry work involves physical and affective labour, connecting the suffering body and mind of the worker with the act of cleaning clothes sullied by wealthy employers. In washing the clothes dirtied through desire and greed, the laundryman becomes the unseen conduit for purification, occupying an ulterior world in which the sins written on the clothes are fully manifested and registered. It is these sinful traits—greed, desire, conspicuous consumption—that may be seen as fundamental to the strivings and financial successes of the white Americans who use the laundry's services.

Wong's adaptation of "The Laundry Song" develops and expands upon the affective and symbolic labour of washing clothes to address the chemical body burden of late-capitalist laundry work. In Wong's poem, hands are "soapworn," as of old, but coughs are now toxic: "kidneys and livers mumble / to the brass of cash registers," and clothes are "laundered in endocrine disrupters / the sudsy chemicals gurgle flames / sulk in your blood for a decade."³² As well as the more immediate physical and existential suffering of the original migrant Chinese laundry worker, modern chemicals leach material suffering into multiple bodies over extensive distances and temporal scales, enacting slow violence through transcorporeality.

The Chinese Labourer

Wen I'to's poem reflects specifically on the experience of the migrant worker, but the figure of the worker has a special place in non-diaspora Chinese literature and art. During the New Cultural Movement of the 1910s and 1920s, a new vernacular literature proliferated in China, taking the lives of working people as its theme.³³ After the Communist Revolution and during the years of Maoist rule, the peasant and worker were centred in cultural narratives of China, both through state-sanctioned Soviet-influenced Socialist Realist art, which celebrated healthy rural peasantry and bucolic fertile farmlands, and in new Chinese literary conventions promoted by Mao Zedong.³⁴

Wong's writing fixates upon the historical figure of the Chinese migrant

worker, both within China and across North America. With this comes a deep self-consciousness that her work is contributing to tropes of the Asian labourer which make real workers more difficult to empathise with, because they become more stereotyped and more theoretical. In the first poem of the collection, she asks “what is the context for ‘you people are hard workers?’”³⁵ Throughout the collection, she deconstructs a range of literary and cultural representations, asking why it is that Chinese migrants workers have historically been figured as so little worthy of empathy and why they are forced to occupy the terrible roles they do in modern industry.

forage contains two photographs of Chinese workers. One is of Agnes Wong, a munitions worker at the Small Arms plant, Long Branch, Ontario.³⁶ The photo was taken in 1944 and shows Agnes assembling a Sten gun for use by Chinese soldiers in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Evocative of the ‘We Can Do It!’ Rosie the Riveter poster designed by J. Howard Miller in 1943, the image of the smiling and head-scarf adorned Agnes Wong reveals under-documented and ulterior histories of the cross-Pacific movement of arms, capital and workers. The second photograph is from c.1889 and shows the “Interior of Victoria Rice Mills showing rice packaged in mats and Chinese worker.”³⁷ The image depicts a factory wall against which are stacked blocky packages of rice in neat rows. To the front right of the shot, a worker stands, hands on his waist-band, his face almost entirely obscured in shadow. Next to it is the visual poem “rise/riven/rice.” It is made of lone-standing words arranged in an inverted and shallow crescent, and includes the words *rise*, *riven* and *rice*, bookended above and below with the letters ‘r / rr / rrr’ and ‘rrr / rr / r’ respectively. The image itself is circular, in juxtaposition they evoke the flag of the People’s Republic of China, with the circular image standing in for the largest of the five red stars and the half moon replacing the semi-circle of four smaller stars arranged around it. Although the flag that the text and image represent was not adopted until 1949, the anachronistic placement of the image of the late nineteenth century worker in the place of the largest star provides a commentary on the centrality of Chinese products and workers in the late 1880s in the making of global capitalism.

The neatly arranged packages of rice and the obliterated face of the Chinese worker show the personality and corporeality of labour flattened and materiality of the product transformed into commodity. Marx, of course, drew attention to how the “sensuous characteristics” of things are “extinguished” as they become commodities.³⁸ Recently, Anna Tsing has described the ways in which the social relations, lives and acts which create products are erased at the moment in which it is transformed into capitalist inventory.³⁹ Wong’s poetic and visual arrangement addresses the alienation inherent in the production of the commodity, in this case, rice. In the crescent arrangement of broken words, “riven” is at the centre, standing for the fragmentation of cultural practices in globalised world; the loss of indigenous language traditions and attendant fracturing of identity; the disruption of pre-modern and non-Western rural economies; and the falsity of the nature/culture divide. The migrant worker is particularly vulnerable to fragmentation, identity displacement and loss of language and other cultural heritage, as well as their role in turning a sensuous substance—rice—into alienated, capitalist commodity. Appropriately, the face of the

worker is erased in the photograph; their identity and individual characteristics have also been erased.

Since the 1980s, many Chinese writers have responded to the deregulated conditions of work, marketisation, globalisation, cheap production, assembly line work and mining in writing which is more emphatically critical of working conditions and state oppression. In *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Worker Poetry* (2017), worker-poets speak out against the immiserating conditions of mechanized labour. The collection includes poetry by Xu Lizhi, born in 1990, who worked in a Foxconn factory making Apple products until his suicide in 2014, and Wu Xia, whose poem “Sundress” demonstrates a tender care for the consumers to whose lifestyles her own life has been sacrificed: “I want to press the straps flat / so they won’t dig into your shoulders when you wear it.”⁴⁰

Wong’s poetry cannot, and does not try to, speak on behalf of these workers: however, her poetry is committed to revealing the conditions of a workforce exhausted and exploited in order to produce the materials of a lifestyle that is in itself ecocidally destructive, and is disproportionately enjoyed by wealthy consumers in the Global North. In “sort by day, burn by night,” Wong describes how workers at China’s electronic recycling plants “liberate recyclable materials’ / into canals & rivers.”⁴¹ Using quotation marks to insinuate an ironic distance, followed by enjambment as form of detournement, Wong reveals how the language of capitalism sanitises and censors the ecocidal realities of the e-waste industry. Another poem, “perverse subsidies,” begins with a command: “will pay for you to take my garbage away so i never have / to look at it, never have to imagine the roaches & rats / crawling through cucumber rinds.” Romantic fantasies of unspoilt Nature are spared for the privileged, while the grotesquery and danger of waste disposal are deputized to underpaid workers. Low-skilled and domestic work is revealed to be none other than environmental censorship for the benefit of the rich. As the poem continues, Wong connects abject and suppressed material disposal, farmed out to anonymous workers, with acts of colonial violence and modern Western imperialism, centred on the oil industry: “fill my car with the corpses of iraqi civilians, the ghost of ken sarowiwa, the bones of displaced caribou.” The sanitised Western imaginary is strewn with ghosts that the speaker knows about—which she invokes—without experiencing guilt or revulsion. The final statement of the poem involves accepting responsibility for this suppressed and repressed knowledge and adopting a bodily solidarity with workers, animals and nature: “disaffect, reinfect me,” the speaker of “perverse subsidies” finally demands.⁴²

In spite of these invocations, Wong’s poetry exhibits a profound self-awareness of the limits of poetry and any rhetorical act. While her speakers are often committed to making some form of change, individual acts of ethical consumerism are always a constrained and seemingly minor way of contributing to environmental and social justice: “*somehow i will begin walking & bicycling for my life, for our lives*” goes the italicised coda to “perverse subsidies.”⁴³ This desperate and guilt-stricken promise draws attention to the difference between the position of the ‘i’ and the experience of the worker. The resulting paradox produces an impasse: we can trace painful chains of harm between ourselves and others, at the same time as being able to make limited

change through ethical consumerism and individual behavioural change. The reader, who may be the direct target of these calls to arms—even the modest decision to use a bike—is left in the same position of powerlessness as Wong’s speaker, cycling for her life, but not *really* cycling her life.

Empathy, Ethics and the Lyric

How is it possible to reverse these processes of erasure? Literature, in particular postcolonial writing, is frequently considered as able to effect change by provoking ethical engagement through empathy. Madhu Krishnan notes how, according to current trends, it is assumed that the (usually Euro-American) reader

may enter into the mind, life, and experience of those who remain socially, politically, economically, and geographically remote, thereby both learning to better empathize with these far-flung others while simultaneously effecting social change through the empathic call to responsibility.⁴⁴

As a window into another life, literature is assumed to be able to expand the ‘Western’ imagination and humanise readers whose own experiences are remote from troubled political circumstances, war, environmental degradation, and demeaning labour. In this way, literature ceases to be textual artifice or aesthetic object, and instead becomes

an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life.⁴⁵

However, the use of literature as a window into the life of another raises problems. The ethical engagement it spurs may be shallow and may serve an aesthetic or cathartic purpose: for example, in the ‘slum tourism’ and ‘poverty porn’ decried in some media and development charity campaigns.⁴⁶ Furthermore, according to Krishnan, it may further entrench the relations of power which produce the conditions causing damage:

By supposing ourselves to inhabit the struggles and experiences of those who remain socially, politically, economically, and geographically remote, we simultaneously run the risk of engaging in what Carolyn Pedwell has termed the “forms of projection and appropriation [...] which can reify existing social hierarchies.”⁴⁷

Krishnan’s article addresses fictional representations of African nations and the idea of ‘Africa’ itself, but her and Pedwell’s critique of the limitations of empathy may

be extrapolated to an analysis of Wong's work through attention to the lyric form and its capacity to form connections between speaker and reader.

In recent years, there has also been increased interest in the empathetic capacities of lyric within experimental poetics in the UK and North America. While Language Poetry's critique of the textual constructedness of the lyric 'I' has been extensively influential, more recent experimental reappraisals of the lyric within feminist, critical race theory, queer and postcolonial studies reassert the radicalism of new forms of lyric 'I' that attest to both the inconsistencies and constructedness of the subject, and the political significance of asserting a lyric voice as an outsider within a white, male and Western lyrical tradition.⁴⁸ In terms of evoking empathy as a means to ethical engagement, John Wilkinson has defended the lyric as productive of what he terms the 'lyric touch':

it is poetry's contamination – the *touch* at the Latin route of contamination – that helps *me* to recognise *you* and to cease “ingrowing into ourselves” through an urgently needed distortion into the quickening of hope.⁴⁹

Lyric, to Wilkinson, has the potential to produce moments of 'contamination'—the touch—in which the other becomes visible to the self and the loneliness of bourgeois individualism is replaced, momentarily, with generosity and hope. Lyric, seemingly offers a brief window if not into the emotions of another then at least out of the private “ingrowing” of the self.

Empathy and ethics are implicated, if not named, in this encounter, and yet the writing of identity intrinsic to writing of the self is tainted by one's complicity in social and environmental injustice. As Keston Sutherland states:

Our identities are dependent for their making and sustenance on the catastrophic exploitation of the unfortunate inhabitants of other places. [...] How can lyric register the experience of ethical neutrality in acts of consumption which reap such harm elsewhere? How is suffering elsewhere figured by lyric poetry? And how can lyric document the rift in the identity of the consumer, that alienation from “my life” propagated by the commodities and advertisements of the society of the spectacle?⁵⁰

These questions are all fundamental to Wong's poetics. In *forage* she produces multiple forms of ruptured and ironic lyric which register an awareness of the material making of identity produced by ecological and trans-corporeal association with the 'I' of another. In the small 'i' of “fluorine,” washing poisons down her sink, and in the GMO-induced horrors of “chaos feary,” the capacities of lyric are stretched as the speaker comes to cognisance both of her dependence on the exploitation of workers, and of her material and ecological entanglement in a world damaged by industry. “chaos feary” provides a play on the autopoiesis of self-creating and regulating cellular life and biological systems, alongside connected notions of writing the self into existence and maintaining it through lyric self-production. The line “me poetic auto

me diverse” taken from “chaos feary” acknowledges multiplicity and rifts in the self.⁵¹ The poem’s meditation on genetic modification further complicates the lyric, which must not only register the alienation from “my life” propagated by commodities, to paraphrase Sutherland, but the contingency of the self on the technologically modified matter which constitutes it.

The Limits of Empathy

Wong’s doubts about lyric’s capacity to promote meaningful ethical engagement through empathy come through in her poem “reverb.” She writes:

‘i counted sweatshops in vancouver’s eastside until i got dizzy
and fainted

assume spiritual plenitude—can you?’⁵²

The first line records a moment of collapse following an excursion around a deprived district. A seemingly earnest statement, it is however undercut by the second. Phrased as a directive and a challenge, the question to the assumed reader urges critique of the naturalised lyric voice of the first line. Who is the ‘i,’ and why did they faint? Is it because of the horror of sweatshops, or are they simply exhausted by walking and counting? The first line seems to describe an act in which identification with those working in sweatshops overwhelms the speaker. This, in turn, is supposed to encourage empathy. The question, then, “assume spiritual plenitude—can you?” challenges the reader to attribute the exact same degree of generosity and concern to the speaker. This chain of empathy highlights the difficulty of ensuring that ethical and empathetic equivalence is reproduced at each stage in the chain. In a collection concerned with intentionally obscured industrial supply chains, the passing on of empathy from one consumer to the next raises doubts about the value of empathy to the reader-consumer, and also the authentic reproducibility of affect through lyric production.

Instead, awareness of transcorporeality produces a more material way of ‘touching’ others, with more discernible modes of lyric contamination. Although Wong’s speakers do not live in the same degraded environments as the workers and poor people she writes about, neither are they transcendent above the material world. Alaimo notes that with “more consumption and exposure, [comes] more risk.”⁵³ In affinity with this sentiment, Wong states: “you might carpenter a tree-house escape / but the assiduous rain will find your pores.”⁵⁴

Sort by day, burn by night

The most direct statements concerning connection, responsibility and contamination come in “sort by day, burn by night”, which addresses the e-waste recycling industry sited, between 1996 and 2015, in Guiyu, China.⁵⁵ While the sites of production, labour, extraction and dumping mentioned within the collection are various and global, this

e-waste worker, but the Western consumer who benefits from digital technologies without considering the problem of sourcing metals or processing post-consumer electronics. Globalised capital relies on distance and the invisibility of social and environmental injustice to ensure consumer apathy and moral indifference. Wong's poetry asserts that these relations are not complex and overwhelming, but are *excessively easy to trace*. On the very devices which may one day end up in a heap of toxic metals in Guiyu, the concerned reader may access thousands of photographs of Guiyu's workers in seconds, as well as images of fields and waterways clogged with scrap electronics and metallic run-off.

Knowledge has never been so accessible. However, making these disguised connections more visible demands an ethical response beyond crass mitigating statements involving collective implication in capitalism and dialectical critiques of the limitations of consumer boycott: "economy of scale / shrinks us all" she states at the poem's close.⁶⁰ While acts of slow violence are notoriously difficult to see and to fix blame for, in the lines quoted here Wong asserts that it is exactly the massiveness and comprehensiveness of capitalist industry that makes consumers particularly responsible. Increasing choice and access to products and technologies ironically bring us closer into connection with lives and places around the world, in spite of the supposed complexity of the Integrated World Capitalism.

Through poetry that collapses imaginative distances through an economy of language, Wong draws attention to a real, material 'touch,' and produces a 'lyric touch' between the 'me' and the 'you'; she does this whilst refusing, in the tradition of experimental and feminist lyric, to adopt a singular or finite subject position. As well as ironising the lyric form, Wong alludes to the classical tradition of the epic in "sort by day, burn by night": "o keyboard irony [...] sing me the toxic ditty of silica."⁶¹ As the singular subject position—whether of worker or consumer—is insufficient to address the huge scale of interconnections, bodies, agencies and materials that Wong includes without synthesising in her poetry, so too is the epic form rejected as too preoccupied with closed, heroic and anthropocentric narratives. Her open form poetry of fragments and juxtapositions contributes to an eco-modernism which rejects grand human narratives at the same time that it acknowledges a deep ecological interconnectedness and transcorporeality beyond the scope of traditional literary conventions to convey.

Foraging, Poetry and Resistance

What, then, is the 'work' of the poet, if not to feel keenly? Rather than constructing an outraged lyric 'I,' or sourcing and/or simulating worker testimonies, Wong uses documentation as a form of activism. "sort by day, burn by night" was, Wong notes, written upon watching the documentary *Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia*, which can be easily sourced online.⁶² In the poem's footnotes, Wong includes the url for the Seattle-based Basel Action Network, an environmental health and justice not-for-profit committed to "ending toxic trade; catalysing a toxics-free future; campaigning for everyone's right to a flourishing environment."⁶³ The lists of References and Acknowledgements at the collection's close further enable readers to

become amateur experts on the environmental issues the poetry addresses. Indeed, Wong includes information of various kinds in multiple poems; for example “canola queasy” is “Dedicated to Percy Schmeiser, the Saskatchewan farmer harassed and sued by Monsanto because genetically engineered canola blew into his fields.”⁶⁴ Facts, statistics and commentary feature in the body-text, while her handwritten marginalia feature quotes, dedications, suppressed and under-represented news about environmental disasters and corruption, including clarifications of terminology and advice on further reading: a hand-written note which runs vertically up one top-right margin notes that “chaos feary” was written “upon reading *Biopiracy* by Vandana Shiva.”⁶⁵ This use of marginalia and citation gestures toward the marginalisation of postcolonial and environmental justice critiques within modernity’s forms of cultural and industrial production. At the same time, it builds a tentative community for the exchange of knowledge, criticism and action. The margins become a fruitful and under-regulated space for the emergence of ulterior knowledge and activism, within which the reader might ‘forage.’

The book’s title, obviously, alludes to the free collection of wild-growing plants: a pre-modern, extra-capitalist and—ideally—sustainable way of collecting food for sustenance. In contrast, Guiyu’s workers engage in an abject and inverted form of foraging: ‘cooking’ circuit boards to extract gold and picking heavy metals from computers by hand. Rather than sustenance accumulation, their work can be compared to ‘salvage accumulation’ as defined by Tsing. Salvage accumulation is the process, foundational to capitalism, “through which lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced.” In this way, ‘free’ labour such as woodland foraging or peasant farming becomes capitalised when these “*pericapitalist activities are salvaged for accumulation.*”⁶⁶ Tsing’s book focuses on the matsutake foragers of the North West US, but the same process applies when any foraged or peasant farmed goods are bought and enter global supply chains, becoming capitalist inventory. Foraged or salvaged goods are not irrelevant to capitalism: indeed, many of the products most valuable to capitalist industry are produced outside of its control, for example coal, oil and metals created through geological processes. Salvage accumulation therefore describes the ways in which capitalism depends upon a store of raw materials that it cannot produce or control: from the flow of water to photosynthesis.

Salvage accumulation goes beyond raw materials such as plants and metals. As Tsing suggests, “[s]imilar processes happen with human labor as well. Even factory labor, that icon of capitalist production, cannot be *made* by capitalists, since capitalists can shape—but not manufacture—human beings.”⁶⁷ As well as the reproductive labour inherent in the creation of workers, a considerable stock of skills and physical attributes are ‘salvaged’ by capitalism in the creation of the most automated and alienated workforce. Capitalism, defined by Tsing, emerges from numerative generative life processes beyond itself in order to survive and thrive. This model of salvage accumulation presents new ways of reading *forage*. The work of e-waste recyclers is emphatically not the free, pericapitalist and life-sustaining act of foraging. Beyond the obvious sarcastic inversion, the use of ‘forage’ to describe labour in Guiyu alludes to additional processes of salvage accumulation in operation there. Workers

are not just producing value by foraging materials from post-consumer detritus: value is being produced through the survival capacities of their bodies and the water and soil ecologies of Guiyu. As long as workers in these abusive industries continue to survive and arrive for work, and to use their own inventiveness, ingenuity and skill to extract metals from e-waste, they become victims and objects of capitalist salvage accumulation.

Like Wong, Tsing's writing addresses all that is exploitative and seemingly comprehensively entrapping about capitalist social and economic organisation. However, Tsing isolates some areas for resistance to capitalism, which in turn can be compared to the more hopeful sections of Wong's poetry. In the foraging activities of the matsutake pickers, Tsing observes forms of work that are experienced as 'freedom' by the pickers. While the fruits of their labour are finally salvaged—and consumed—by capital, the forms of life-making which take place prior to salvage suggest other possibilities to the labour contract. As she states, "Only when we begin to notice the elaborate and heterogeneous making of capitalist worlds might we usefully discuss vulnerabilities, points of purchase, and alternatives."⁶⁸

Wong, likewise, is interested in different forms of exchange, economic models and ways of relating to human and non-human worlds. In the poem, "for Lee Kyung Hae, Korean farmer martyred in Cancun (1947-2003)" she celebrates the anti-neoliberal protester who led a hunger strike at the WTO headquarters in Geneva in Spring 2003, and in September of the same year stabbed himself on top of a police barricade at the WTO conference in Mexico. Wong interprets this desperate and despairing act which as both sacrifice and gift, and in its tragic excess she foresees the possibilities of social organisation beyond capitalism. The notes of hope sounded in this poem are inspired by the generative capacities of both the earth and the human, and the potential for life to be otherwise:

WTO
smashes rice farmers into
the enduring earth

but your sacrifice
invokes capitalism's fall
so earth resurges

gift economy
socialism's red fist unclenched
open palm stories⁶⁹

Poetry cannot produce alternative economic models or liberate the workers bearing the body burdens of capitalist industry; however, it can be used to accumulate and share knowledge, show solidarity, and offer counter narratives which reveal the interconnectedness of life and the vitality of earth and the human. Rita Wong's poetry insists on the interconnectedness of social, subjective and ecological damage. It proposes critical and collective means of intervening in social and environmental

injustices through consciousness raising, activism, boycott and protest. Finally, it explores alternatives to the labour contract under capitalism, introducing the vital and significant notion of the body burden to bring an often-neglected awareness of materiality to theories of work.

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