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Narrative and Normative Disjuncture: A Queer World-Literary Reading of

May-Lan Tan's 'Date Night' (2014)

Introduction:

This essay takes the migrant domestic worker as an emblematic figure for world literary study, concentrating on May-Lan Tan's portrayal of an Indonesian maid/nanny working in Hong Kong in her cinematic short story 'Date Night' (2014). A report by the International Labour Organization puts the number of such workers at 'at least 53 million' globally, stressing that the large majority of these are women who are commonly 'shielded from public view and attention' due to their position in the informal economy (June 2012, v). Situated precariously in their host countries, and susceptible to a range of abuses, this marginalised female workforce allows us to consider global capitalism 'from below, in person, and located at [...] specific geopolitical-cultural site[s]', without which, 'we lose sight of what it means to live, work, play, and die in a globalized world but varied economy' (Chang and Ling 2000, 33). At one and the same time, these women's migratory journeys complicate what Charlotte Hooper describes as the 'association of globalization with elite masculinity and frontier culture', instead offering 'alternative accounts [...] which incorporate the personal and the domestic' (2000, 71). Shining a light on the informal labour practices undergirding the world economy, such narratives reveal the gendered and sexual fault lines of neoliberal globalisation.

Although there are a number of definitions of world literature currently in circulation, my argument takes inspiration from the Warwick School's materialist conception of the field as that which allows us to discern 'the literary registration of

modernity' in the context of 'combined and uneven development' (WReC 2015, 17), words that correspond with Tan's critique of the inequity between her wealthy Hong Kong-based subjects and the interlinked locations from which they source their labour. As Benita Parry has cautioned, a certain historical over-reliance on notions of diaspora and cosmopolitanism within postcolonial studies has led to the hazard of 'forgetfulness about that other, economically forced dispersal of the poor [...] – the vast numbers of contract workers, casual laborers, or domestic servants' (2004, 73). A world-literary emphasis counters this alleged erasure, drawing attention to a world-system 'in which "local" and "global" come together in conflictual and unsteady flux' (WReC 2015, 67). Using this framing, figures such as Tan's maid, Davy, prove as representative of global modernity as any multicultural elite. In fact, Stephen Shapiro's claim that semi-peripheral locations are where 'the trauma of experience by peripheral peoples' and the 'speculative entrepreneurialship [sic] of the core collide to produce new forms of representation' (2008, 37-8) makes a case for such zones – and individuals – being at the forefront of the socio-cultural shifts engendered by globalisation. As Shapiro's reference to 'representation' suggests, aesthetic concerns are far from absent in this kind of world-literary modelling. Rather, as WReC put it:

To grasp world-literature as the literary registration of modernity under the sign of combined and uneven development, we must attend to its modes of spatio-temporal compression, its juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience, its barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar – as these manifest themselves in literary forms, genres and aesthetic strategies (2015, 17).

Put simply, the narrative schisms of any world-literary text can be read for their exposure of the tension between accelerating market integration, and the localised

manifestations, disjoins, and disparities of a combined and uneven world.

Accordingly, this essay pursues the relationship between literary device and systemic inequality.

‘Date Night’ is relayed through the first-person perspective of a child named Lily, as Indonesian-heritage Tan imagines herself the pampered progeny of Hong Kong’s cosmopolitan elite. Featuring in the author’s debut collection *Things to Make or Break* – described by the *Guardian* as offering ‘strange, flinty, cigarette-stained narratives [that] speed by’ (Smart 14/03/2014, npag) – the story’s filmic nature and formal polish work holistically to reflect the ennui of global modernity, or what Frederic Jameson calls ‘the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism’ (1997, 45). Its shining surfaces and exhilarating prose replicate the ‘illimitable vastness [...] the gloss and smoothness of material things’ (26), also appearing to conform to what has been deemed colloquially ‘plastic realism’ (Shivani 12/06/2016). Yet, when read for what Jameson calls its ‘political unconscious’ (2002), Tan’s ghoulish rendering of both the sleeping city and the protagonist’s mother resonates with the gothic language of Marx’s *Capital*, whereby capital is ‘dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour’ (Marx 1990, 342). It is, therefore, through this unsettling ghostly imagery that Tan’s critique of world-systemic inequity finds stylistic outlet.

A queer reading of the story might similarly focus on its narrative idiosyncrasies, drawing out the ways in which sexual non-conformity helps illustrate capital’s uneven logics. Judith Roof, for example, writes about the relationship between narrative and normative disorder, linking narrative convention to the development of capitalism itself. She asserts that the ‘naturalized reiterations’ of the

‘irresistible merger of family and state’ have governed ‘the conceptions, forms, logic, and operation of narrative’ (1996, xvii). Unpacking this further, she claims that:

The bourgeois need for the correct narrative, one effected by proper heterosexual, reproductive sexuality, and good timing, positions sexuality as itself causal: perverted sexuality is the cause of the bad narrative, familial disfunction, low production; and good, reproductive sexuality is the cause of profit, continuity, and increase (35).

By this measure, Davy’s strange, and not fully explained relationship with her friend, Farah might be understood to illustrate the story’s ‘sexual unconscious’. Whereas its titular date – between Lily’s mother and a man named Henry – reflects world-systemic dependency on the nuclear family and heterosexual ‘productivity’, Davy’s ambiguous friendship creates a certain narrative instability, gesturing towards the ways in which it is possible to disorder ‘proper’ reproductive sexuality. Both world-literature and queer theory, then, draw attention to the narrative, and normative, ruptures occasioned by those peripheral figures working in the interstices of the global capitalist economy.

These two fields of scholarship, however, are not often considered in tandem. In fact, they are frequently viewed as antithetical. Parry has expressed caution about post-structuralist influenced analyses that have a ‘one-sided concern with the constitution of “otherness”/alterity/difference’ (2004, 75), while queer theorists have demonstrated hesitancy about a ‘certain blindness to sexuality’ within Marxist traditions (Floyd 2009, 2). This essay therefore charts a path between an emphasis on ‘*difference*’ versus ‘*inequality*’ (WReC 2015, 7); it argues that pairing these seemingly divergent schools of thought reveals the interlinked nature of narrative, capitalism and heteropatriarchy.

A Combined and Uneven World:

In recent decades, Indonesia has seen huge increases in outward migration, with estimates of ‘nearly four million’ workers overseas, of whom ‘more than seventy per cent’ are female (Sim 2010, 43). Since the 1980s, however, ‘appalling stories’ have been filtering ‘back to Indonesia of mistreatment of its women domestic workers’ with examples given not only of ‘inhumanly long hours of work, but also employers failing to pay their housemaids, withholding their passports, refusing to let them contact people outside the home and ultimately rape and brutality’ (Blackburn 2004, 188). Such reports may have outraged national pride, but the government has nevertheless been unwilling to jeopardise such an important income stream, remittances from such workers constituting a significant contribution to the country’s economy. ‘[C]aught between its economic agenda and the need for moral accountability’, the Indonesian state ‘scapegoated several recruitment agencies’ and ‘put the blame on the migrant women themselves for being lacking in skills’ (Sim 2010, 42); none of which stemmed the outward flow of labour. By 2006, there were 116,000 Indonesian women working in Hong Kong alone, forming ‘the second largest ethnic minority [...] after Filipina domestic workers’ (43). This migrant workforce has played a crucial role in the city’s economic development for, as Youngs explains, in ‘Hong Kong, as in Western economies generally, the participation of women in the labor force has been a growing structural element of both the economy’s growth and its transformation to a service orientation’ (2000, 52). The ‘high priority’ given to ‘maintaining the *feminized* domestic care role’, however, means that the ‘migrant workforce has been crucial as a major *external* solution to this *internal* problem’ (52), with the key emphasis here being on the perceived feminine nature of caring work. As

Patricia Fernández Kelly describes, '[c]ultural norms sanctioning women's confinement to the household' have masked 'an objective reality in which domestic work is a mechanism subsidizing accumulation', leading to a paradox by which women have been subordinated 'not because their work is socially inferior or unimportant, but precisely because of its importance. Women's labor both in production and in reproduction, is fundamental to the maintenance of economic and political systems' (1986, 6). In this instance, migrant females of colour such as Davy take on the tasks of social reproduction previously assigned to women like Lily's mother, displacing and racialising, rather than dismantling, the gendered labour required by the capitalist world-system.

Across the pages of 'Date Night', evidence of mistreatment is not overt, yet a subtle demand is made on reader sympathy as we build up a picture of Davy's life. She is first introduced to the reader functionally, as 'wearing yellow rubber gloves and clutching a blue sponge' (Tan 2014, 24), words that emphasise the industry central to her role. Immediately after her first appearance, she is given the order by Lily's mother to 'go to Movieland and rent some Japanese cartoons' (24), followed by the abrupt instruction: '[t]he macaroni will be ready at eight. Make a salad, and put sliced pears on it' (25). The story's nine pages are punctuated with further descriptions of Davy getting up 'to refill my glass' (27), taking 'my dishes to the kitchen' (28), hurrying off 'to check the bathwater' and 'carrying my folded pyjamas' (30), sentiments emphasising the maid's daily drudgery and drawing a clear distinction with her employers' gilded lives. This can be conceptualised in feminist terms as offering a literary politics of the mundane. For, as Francesca Bettio and Alina Verashchagina assert: '[a]mong the most fundamental challenges to conventional economics and economic history posed by a gender perspective is the

importance that one might attach to everyday life' (2008, 32). They define this as '[t]he daily tasks of reproduction', which include a: 'pragmatic world of habit, routine and regularity, neither questioned nor consciously valued' (33). Such an approach, they claim, 'crosses the boundaries of public and private' and 'enlarges our conception of where the economic sphere, and economic behaviour, begin and end' (33). This may be the case when discussing women's reproductive work in general. However, in applying such notions to the informal sector, and to women of colour working transnationally, there is even greater onus, I suggest, to engage critically with Bettio and Verashchagina's call for more 'careful scrutiny' of those 'routines, behaviours and understandings to which economics has largely been blind' (35). In fact, we may want to query whether, and how, the race- and class-based elements of such labour are being taken into account, for it is precisely in freeing up other women from this kind of 'feminised' work that female domestic workers operate at, and expose, the fault lines of informal working.

Tan also illustrates the way in which Indonesia is harnessed to Hong Kong within the international economy, reflecting what Mather and Stadler call the city's 'complex oscillation between the global and the local' (2017, 1). More specifically, Alvin Y. So has outlined how recent decades have seen Hong Kong transform from 'an industrial state specializing in exporting cheap clothing, then to an industrial state producing high quality goods and services, and then further to a world financial center' (April 1986, 254), a description that gives a sense of the conurbation's regional importance. This is borne out when Lily confides 'I've been to Bali twice' and 'It's my favorite vacation place', whereas Davy (who is from Solo/Surakarta) replies 'I'm not yet go to Bali' and 'I first time Hong Kong' (Tan 2014, 27). The simplicity of her expression here signals to the reader the structural

reasons for this lack of mobility on her part. As what John Friedmann calls a ‘world city’ (January 1986), Hong Kong serves as potent economic inducement, relegating Davy’s home to mere source of the labour demanded by international capital. Lily, meanwhile, lays claim to Bali as moneyed playground, a place of ‘big swimming pools’ and ‘ice that looks like Christmas lights’ (Tan 2014, 27), words according with Hooper’s description of how imagery of ‘spaceship earth’ serves, for elites, to ‘reinforce the view of the world as a single locality [...] easily accessible in its entirety’ (Hooper 2000, 68). Further poignancy is added when the child offers Davy the use of Skype to speak to her young daughter back home, a proposal rejected with the explanation that she ‘not have computer’, which makes Lily ‘feel kind of bad for suggesting it’ (Tan 2014, 30). This interaction makes clear the disjunctures of a combined and uneven system: Lily’s family might hop on a plane with ease; but Davy cannot even speak to or see her own daughter. Accordingly, Tan brings to life what WReC call ‘the necessary flipside of the mirroring opacities of a postmodern topos’ (2015, 13) with, in this case, a ‘postmodern topos’ being represented by the high-rise building in which the woman and child’s interaction occurs. In turn, Davy herself comes to exemplify the ‘structural connectedness’ between ‘a cultural dominant expressive of the completed triumph of commodity logic’ and ‘a condition in which this triumph is not only incomplete but arrested’, where ‘the development of underdevelopment’ is essential to the workings of the system as a whole (13). In this view, Hong Kong, Bali and Solo/Surakarta are connected yet unequal, Hong Kong acting as semi-peripheral conduit for ‘the periphery’s labor-power and natural resources’ (WReC 06-09/07/2017, npag), a geographical relationship mirrored by the peripheral living space allocated to Davy within the family home: ‘behind the kitchen, in the room that used to be the laundry room’ (1997, 24),

A Typology of Combined and Uneven Development

On first reading, the formal sheen of Tan's story appears to replicate what Jameson calls the 'illimitable vastness [...] the gloss and smoothness of material things' (26), in echo of the systemic logic that naturalises Lily's position above Davy in the economic hierarchy. 'Date Night' demonstrates a repeated fascination with the 'glossy' (Tan 2014, 23), the 'silvery', the 'shiny' (24) and the 'shimmery' (26); words which are repeated liberally throughout. Similarly, advertising and product placement run across the story. Its very first line refers to Lily enthusiastically 'watching an infomercial for spray-on hair' (23), while her mother, an Art Director at the global advertising firm Ogilvy and Mather, maintains a distinct performance of glossy femininity, continued allusions being made to her heels, her pink dress, and various lipstick tones – in support of her opening description as 'colorful and plastic' (13). On one level, then, 'Date Night' reflects Jameson's interest in 'a kind of return of the repressed [...] a strange, compensatory, decorative exhilaration' which is 'the glitter of gold dust, the spangling of gilt' (1997, 9) that inures those benefitting from global capitalism to its injustices.

The story's glossy tonal coherence is disturbed, however, by a strangely written sequence as Lily waits up for her mother to return from her date. This sees our young narrator transported outwards, in sensory apprehension of the wider economic currents fuelling their maid's migrancy. Thus far, Lily's only view of the outside world has been mediated through the entryphone (which she used to spy on her mother's suitor) and the apartment's windows. She is, therefore, sealed off from the lives of those outside, in accordance with Jameson's description of how the postmodern city creates an 'alarming disjunction point between the body and its built

environment’, which ‘itself stands as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma’ of ‘the incapacity of our minds [...] to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects’ (1997, 43). Silently observing the city, Lily appears cowed by its confounding reach as she looks out of the window to find that ‘[t]he world seems big and spooky, and like there’s no one in it’ (Tan 2014, 31), words relayed in an oddly blank and disassociated tone. ‘Big and spooky’ signals the strength of feeling on her part, whilst her momentary sense of isolation is palpable, instantiating Tan’s claim with regard to the collection that: ‘I definitely set out to write people who were alone in the world’ (Laner 30/11/2015, npag). Lily’s feelings here correlate with Jameson’s coinage of the term ‘intensities’ (1997, 5) to express ‘an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment, stupor, and awe, of what was so enormous as to crush human life altogether’ (33). If, according to Jameson, it was once the natural world that constituted society’s ‘other’, now, it is the ‘anti-natural power of dead human labor stored up in our machinery’ which ‘seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis’ (34). This horizon – both literal and figurative – is what engenders such feelings in Lily.

Jameson’s reference to ‘dead’ human labour, meanwhile, carries through to the more ghoulish aspects of the scene, Lily observing how, below her: ‘[g]reenish lights are on in the furniture shops, and the perfect living rooms and bedrooms look bright and empty’ (Tan 2014, 31). ‘Lights’ and ‘bright’ give the impression of the child’s senses being assailed, while ‘perfect’ invites readerly suspicion, drawing correspondence between the bedroom in which Lily is situated and the staged scene below. ‘Empty’ continues the theme of individual isolation, while the fact that the girl looks specifically at commercial premises further delineates the parameters of her

viewpoint. When she later wakes to find her mother sleeping next to her, similar imagery is transposed to her parent, whose face is ‘strange and white’, ‘the blueness of her pulse [...] a flashing light’ (31) like the ‘greenish lights’ of earlier. Her mother’s ghostly visage, in tandem with the fact that our attention is drawn to her pulse, echoes the gothic language of Marx’s *Capital*, whereby capital is ‘dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour’ (Marx 1990, 342). The empty vacuity of Lily’s view and her mother’s prone form also correspond to David Harvey’s description of the ‘kind of shell-shocked, blasé, or exhausted silence’ displayed by the postmodern subject who is persuaded to ‘bow down before the overwhelming sense of how vast, intractable, and outside any individual or even collective control everything is’ (1992, 350). The shining surfaces of Tan’s story might, therefore, mirror those of the consumer society that Lily and her mother inhabit, but this interlude signals both their – and Tan’s – underlying unease with the intertwined local and global disparities of their world.

Queer Narrative Gaps:

If world-literary analysis allows us to detect the combined and uneven (formal) relations playing out between Davy and her charge, the quintessentially suspicious hermeneutics of queer theory encourage us to unpack the aesthetic uncertainties and divergent economic practices of queer lives. As disenfranchised as she may be, Davy is also a woman with a clear and distinct plan. Lily’s awkward questioning, for example, reveals that her maid has committed to working in the city for seven years while a friend back home, Farah, cares for her daughter. In turn, Davy herself has previously looked after Farah’s son while her friend completed her own seven-year stint abroad. When both her and Farah’s respective periods of work are over: ““We

stay home, open for business.” She leans back, looking pleased’ (Tan 2014, 29). This mention of home is granted poignancy by the fact that it is said whilst labouring inside somebody else’s. Nevertheless, Davy’s pleasure at their scheme proves compelling. Given what we might presume are the limited circumstances of her life, the pair appear to have carved out an opening for themselves and their children, in accordance with Chiho Ogaya’s description of how domestic workers in Hong Kong often ‘set their sights’ on garnering ‘resources to facilitate their economic and social reintegration upon returning home’ (2004, 394). Ogaya interprets this movement positively, viewing such women as ‘creating their own resistant subjectivities to overcome the structural constraints imposed upon them’ (388). However, much as Davy exhibits individual agency, the idea that she overcomes wider macro-economic forces is ambitious. It is, for example, those very same structures, which have separated her from her child and driven her to Hong Kong in the first place. Kimberley A. Chang and L. H. M. Ling’s caution against undue optimism, particularly that which ‘ignores the complex structures of power in which acts of resistance are embedded’ (2000, 33) therefore proves pertinent. Nevertheless, if Nash and Fernández Kelly claim that the mobility of migrant workers ‘threatens the coalescence of the family as cooperative network’ (1983, xii), then here we see Davy and Farah constituting a new form of ‘family’ so as to weather challenging economic tides.

There are additionally several instances where narrative coherence breaks down and it becomes evident that neither Davy’s employers, nor we as readers, are able to interpret her thoughts with any confidence. When Lily suggests that Davy should have brought her daughter so as to provide her with a ‘sister’, the maid merely tips ‘her head to the side’ in ambiguous fashion (Tan 2014, 28). This gesture could be

read in a number of ways, yet Tan gives no further exposition. Similarly, when Lily mentions her mother's job, we hear Davy's muted response but no qualifying details: "I like art," she says quietly' (29) – words granting her cultural capital (Bourdieu 1996) perhaps not anticipated by the reader. Finally, when Lily asks the maid to watch cartoons with her, Davy declines this request with the faltering words 'I'm –' and '– my suitcase' (Tan 2014, 30). Her case has been mentioned previously, when Lily speculated that Davy's photograph of her daughter 'must have taken up half her suitcase' (28). It is then, implicitly connected with Davy's home, its reference suggesting more intentionality to the woman's refusal than just that caused by the limitations of language. Neither Lily, nor the reader, however, can be sure why Davy has claimed this time for herself, or what she will be doing with it. 'Our' maid, Lily is reminded, is not always 'ours'. This reticence on Davy's part can be related to Ogaya's assertion that, in Hong Kong, 'one of the common reasons for the premature termination of a domestic worker's contract is that children become attached' to their caregiver (2004, 384) – Davy might simply be attempting to safeguard her own employment by maintaining some distance from the child. Yet ultimately, the reader is left to draw their own conclusion, as she slips quietly from the narrative frame, and the story returns its focus to Lily's mother, in keeping with one reviewer's comment on the collection as a whole that, '[a]s a reader, you may find gaps that call out to be bridged, with the reasons for those spaces left for you to figure out' (Carroll 18/09/2014, npag). This reference to gaps and spaces serves as reminder of Roof's discussion of the 'shared structural relation' between the 'middle, minor and perverse' and 'the dominant, the normative and the important', whereby 'the possibility of a different perspective produces a threat to narrative and meaning' (2002, 8). In this case, Davy's lingering (and labouring) presence behind the scenes undermines the

story's formal polish just as much as Tan's ghoulish writing of Lily's response to the mercantile world outside.

Queer Migrancy:

The narrative irregularity accompanying Davy and Farah's relationship can be mined further, in keeping with the spirit of a collection that 'doesn't limit [...] [itself] to one gender perspective or one sexual orientation' (Allen 24/06/2014, npag). The maid's innocuous sounding phrase 'we stay home' (Tan 2014, 29), for example, might linger in the reader's mind, it being noteworthy that the women are already planning ahead together beyond Davy's seven-year stint. Certainly, something about their dynamic intrigues young Lily as she asks: 'Is Farah your best friend?' (30). In response, Davy 'smiles and shrugs. She looks at the front door as if she's expecting someone to come in', causing Lily to empathise 'You must miss them' (30). Notable here is the use of 'them' i.e. including Farah, rather than just 'her' for Davy's daughter. The maid's ambiguous smile echoes her earlier pleasure at their plan, while her glance at the door offers the haunting sense of her friend's very real presence in her mind. The mysteriousness of Farah's role is only compounded by the fact that she features peripherally in the photograph Davy carries with her of their children. She 'points to a woman's dress and some frizzy hair at the side of the photo. "Farah," she says' (29).

The women's friendship can be contextualised in light of research addressing same-sex desire and female domestic workers in Hong Kong, Amy Sim having discussed the 'emerging form of alternative sexuality' visible among the territory's foreign workers and going so far as to describe 'a phenomenon in Hong Kong, of lesbianism among Indonesian migrant women' (2010, 38). Now, Farah may not be in the city with Davy in the story's present, but she has spent seven years there

previously, being exposed to its alternate gendered and sexual norms. As Sim outlines:

Lesbian practices among these migrant women did not always start in Hong Kong; on the contrary, the acculturation to alternative sexuality often began in the labour sending processes in Indonesia. Without exception, all potential Indonesian women migrant workers to Hong Kong, would have spent time [...] in training centres in Indonesia (44).

According to Sim, a number of women 'have reported that their initiation and awareness of same-sex relationships' began in such centres (46). In particular, those returning from overseas are 'required to go through the entire process of living in training camps again when seeking new foreign employment' (46), meaning that these sites serve as transit point through which those departing for the first time, and those who have already spent time abroad, mingle freely. If we take Tan's story at face value, Farah would have passed through such locations a number of times during her seven-year stint, due to the fact that women are allowed to take contracts for only two years at a time before returning and starting the process again. Sim therefore explains how: 'It is through some of these relatively sophisticated women familiar with urban lifestyles in cities elsewhere that same-sex relationships become something of a "fashion statement"' (46). We cannot know with any certainty whether such terms apply to Farah, or if they reflect Tan's deliberate intention, but they certainly do offer context for the gaps in the women's story. Yet Sim cautions that such relations are 'not always indicative of anomie, rebellion, resistance' or 'sexual adventurism' (46). Instead, they can be viewed as 'attempts to preserve the moral order connected to standards of women's sexual behaviour in their community of origin' (46) precisely because the women in question still refuse sexual relations with

men. At the very least, however, Davy and Farah's plan speaks to Jack Halberstam's claim that 'queer time' develops 'in opposition to institutions of heterosexuality, and reproduction', so that, queerness is 'an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices' (2005, 1). Much as Davy's labour subsidises accumulation in Hong Kong (through freeing up her employer to enter the workplace), it *also* functions to provide an alternative to those 'productive' heterosexual relations exemplified by the mother and Henry's date, signalling the queer desire for unconventional responses to the pervasiveness of capitalist ideology.

Conclusion:

If Lily's mother can be viewed as a participant in, and beneficiary of, the kind of "techno-muscular" capitalism' described by Chang and Ling – through which both men and women partake in a 'glitzy, Internet-surfing, structurally integrated world of global finance, production, trade, and telecommunications' (2000, 27) – this is even more the case with her date, Henry. Described as wearing a 'pencil-gray suit' (Tan 2014, 26), his expensive-looking car and preference for French food, position him as wealthy exemplar of heteropatriarchal capitalism. This representative quality is perhaps why we hear minimal description of him other than a comment from Davy as to his height (25) and Lily's observation that she 'can't see Henry's face' (26) when she peers out to spy on the pair. Tall, besuited and anonymous, his presentation corresponds to R. W. Connell's description of 'transnational business masculinity' whereby: '[t]he hegemonic form of masculinity in the current world gender order is the masculinity associated with those who control its dominant institutions: the business executives who operate in global markets' (July 1998, 16). As such, his and

the mother's prospective union serves as exemplar of the kind of 'productive' economic norms identified by Roof (1996).

However, reading between the lines of the story, concerns can be detected as to the problematic nature of this 'ideal type' romance. Lily notes that her mother's 'long hair wrapped across her mouth' in the wind as she leaves – as if she is being gagged – while her 'bright dress flutters like a pink flame' (Tan 2014, 26). Flames, of course, can easily be extinguished, while the fact that Henry 'fits his hand to her back and pushes her towards his car' lends an uncomfortably proprietorial note, one compounded by the fact that he 'struts' around to his side of the vehicle (26). Racial undertones may also feed into the pair's dynamic. Henry's full name – Henry Schum – sounds Germanic in origin, suggesting that he is a white, European male. In contrast, Lily's mother speaks Cantonese in the opening lines of the story, which she only does 'when she's totally stressed out' (23), indicating that it may be her first language. Her hair is long, black and straight and, despite the references to her 'long white legs' (26) and 'white' (31) face, it is fair to speculate as to whether she is at least part-Asian. Perhaps then, Lily's mother is not quite so comfortably distant from those interlocking racial and gendered oppressions experienced by Davy as might first appear. At the very least, regressive gendered and sexual dynamics seem to infuse both their date and the system of which Henry is representative.

By way of contrast, Davy and Farah's friendship unsettles these same norms, highlighting capitalism's dependence on the gendered labour of women, the nuclear family and 'productive' heterosexual pairing. This does not change the material reality of Davy's daily drudgery, nor the pain of her separation from her child. It does, however, illustrate the extent to which 'the reproduction of labor power' means that 'heterosexuality has been imposed on us as the only acceptable

sexual behavior’, sexual relations between women being taboo, in part, ‘because, in bourgeois morality, anything that is unproductive is obscene, unnatural, perverted’ (Federici 2012, 24). Inconsistent with bourgeois codes it may be, but Davy and Farah’s relationship nevertheless continues outside the bounds of both the story’s narrative frame and the sexualised norms of capitalist logic – just as Farah’s image falls out of shot in the photograph Davy carries by her side.

This essay has paired world-literary and queer approaches in order to draw attention to questions of narrative disjuncture, and its relationship to normative modes – whether economic or sexual. In fact, deploying these methodologies in tandem allows us to observe the ways in which the fiscal and the sexual are always already intertwined. If a world-literary approach pinpoints Tan’s critique of capitalist modernity through revealing the story’s ‘political unconscious’ (Jameson 2002), queer theorising draws out how Davy and Farah’s relationship undermines the norms of ‘productive’ heterosexual union (Roof 1996, 2002) exemplified by the story’s titular date, revealing what might be deemed its ‘sexual unconscious’. As we experience a moment of resurgent debate about the concept of world literature (which itself originates in the sense that globalisation has thrown the disciplinary protocols of the humanities into question), Tan’s narrative illustrates the importance of accounting for the ways in which sexuality and global capitalism intersect, revealing, at one and the same time, the potential gains of deploying materialist and formalist approaches in tandem.

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