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The Cost of Work: Performance, Asian Diasporas, and Neoliberalism

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Theater Studies

by

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December 2022

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by

Rebecca 華思恩 S. Wear

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ABSTRACT

The Cost of Work: Performance, Asian Diasporas, and Neoliberalism

by

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Dominant frameworks of performance continue to assess and value the product, or the spectatorial experience. Neoliberalism perpetuates a similar framework of disassociating process from product, as it operates through the concealment and obfuscation of labor and its impact on minoritized individuals, particularly that of the world's largest demographic: Asian diasporic women. These lacunae expose the underlying tensions of global majority identities and Transpacific capital. They also compel questions about who and what benefit from these hegemonic investments. In opposition to traditional performance frameworks, recent anti-racist theatre movements have laid bare the fact that creative process and behind-the-scenes labor matter just as much as onstage representation. This dissertation brings together performance, Asian diasporas, and neoliberalism to intervene in the continued elision of Asian diasporic women. I argue that labor in theatrical performance serves as a way to elucidate, perpetuate, and resist the material and affective impacts of neoliberalism.

I trace the material conditions and affective experiences of Asian diasporic women from the 1800s to the present in three contemporary performances. By highlighting representations of key moments in Asian immigrant history, I assert that analyzing the ways in which performances are made is key to understanding what performances are created, and the limitations and stakes of these representations shape the treatment of global majority bodies. Using theatrical labor and the performance of labor as a site of inquiry, chapters dismantle the logic of labor under neoliberalism. Through dramaturgical inquiry and an

exploration of production elements, analyses of performances reveal the affective resonances of an internalized Ornamental aesthetic, self-commodification, and networks and actions of care. As such, chapters engage work that re-writes Asian diasporic women into archives and the current moment, values their contributions, and highlights ways in which neoliberalism imposes both material and emotional precarity onto the self.

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Introduction

In the opening scene of the Daniels' acclaimed film, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, Evelyn (played by Michelle Yeoh) rushes between demands.¹ Sitting in a room crammed with the paraphernalia of life, she struggles to make sense of the unkempt pile of receipts that cover her entire dining room table. Her husband sweetly and ineffectively tries to engage her— he really wants to talk about something – but only if she's paying attention. Her steamer chimes tinnily, interrupting his attempt at connection. She leaps up, frantically fluffing the freshly steamed rice, listing off the days' plethora of tasks: prepare for an IRS audit later that morning, paint the water mark in the ceiling with the right shade of white, set the table, organize the party later that night, and on and on... As she frenetically returns to the receipts, Evelyn tasks her husband with cooking her father's favorite noodles, supervising his cooking from the dining room. Her father wakes up, shouting through the walls to her. Evelyn flips between Mandarin, Cantonese, and English without a thought. She adroitly drains the noodles as the front door rings, and then quickly steps through a door in the kitchen into the laundromat. Inside the laundromat, she navigates customers' demands, her daughter's desire to introduce her new girlfriend to Evelyn's father, and her husband's incompetent attempts to help. The pace here is not exuberant, but delirious.²

We watch Evelyn juggle the disparate, cross-cultural nature of the emotional appeals of her family (given her immigrant husband and American-born daughter); the physical

¹ Kwan (and popular media outlets) often refers to the creators and directors of this film, Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, as “the Daniels.”

² Note that even the title of this absurdist science fiction film proclaims this pace through its lack of grammar. Rather than offering readers a chance to process the idea of experiencing everything, everywhere, all at the same time, instead, the film title crams this multiplicity of ideas into the same breath.

needs of the domestic labor of cooking and caretaking for her recently-arrived immigrant father; the attention-deficit of her customers and their impositions upon her livelihood; the racialized expectations of institutions (represented in the film by the Internal Revenue Service); and her attempt to make a sense of meaning from it all. The health of Evelyn's emotions, family, and business is questionable; all seem precarious, though she is fighting so hard to keep everything afloat that she has no time to recognize them as such. This scene typifies the material inequality caused by neoliberalism and the various forms of labor that Asian diasporic women must therefore take on.

Though feminist scholarship reminds us that we all operate in multiple economies simultaneously, this opening also showcases the ways in which Evelyn is rendered invisible, regardless of the labor she performs while navigating various economies. Everyone negotiates the demands of wage-earning labor, domestic labor (such as cooking and cleaning for the self or others), volunteering or service work (as in, for example, at one's child's school, a charity organization, or participating in a committee at one's wage-earning job), larger networks of caretaking, and others. But the burden to juggle these demands and juggle them well fall particularly heavily on Asian diasporic women and other immigrant women. Some forms of labor (such as wage-earning labor) are more readily recognized as "work," while others, such as reproductive labor and offstage labor in performance, are diminished as "women's work," negated, expected, or elided. No one, not her family, customers, or intergalactic enemies, recognizes the multiplicity of work that Evelyn bears.

The film's opening also reveals the "spiritual impoverishment inherent in a society dominated by money relations" (Kurashige 22). Evelyn grapples with the existential worth of her accomplishments and her life because all she can see, in where she has ended up, is the

lack thereof. When her husband entreats Evelyn to see that she's nurtured a happy family and a successful business, Evelyn looks around the poorly-lit, plastic-gadget-crowded room. She stares dully into the distance, perhaps considering what might fulfill her – and just as the possibility of reflection opens, her father calls out with a demand. Evelyn doesn't have time to consider this impoverishment because she's too busy reacting to the demands of the world. While she might hope for something beyond (or at least, some kind of break), as the film eventually shows, for such a thing to happen, the universe must literally upend and exponentially expand into the multiverse, or the multiplicity of linked universes which hold Evelyns living alternative lives.³

Yet breaking into other worlds through “verse-jumps” simply compounds Evelyn's impoverishment.⁴ The multiverse quality of the film illustrates Evelyn's distractions elsewhere. As *Everything Everywhere All at Once (Everything)* unfurls, it increasingly illustrates this mental and emotional chaos, splicing together wildly dissimilar scenarios and images of other Evelyns, forcing the central Evelyn to increasingly juggle simultaneous demands.⁵ If we consider Evelyn as operating synecdochally for other Asian immigrant women, she reveals how many Asian immigrant women must contend with all of this, everywhere, all at once.

³ He states, “Look, this is your universe. Once bubble floating in the cosmic form of existence. Every surrounding bubble has slight variations, but the further away we get from your universe, the bigger the differences” (*Everything* 34:22).

⁴ Waymond continues, “To temporarily link your consciousness to another version of yourself, accessing all of their memories, their skills, even their emotions... it's called verse-jumping” (*Everything* 34:54).

⁵ One Evelyn lives in a universe where everyone has fingers made out of lengthy hot dogs, another Evelyn is a rock on a hillside, a third Evelyn is a chef with a tall toque, etc.

In the summer of 2022, I sit in guest artist housing, watching *Everything* as my temperature grows. As I track Evelyn managing external demands onscreen, my chest tightens and my breathing grows shallow. Am I emotional because I feel some undefinable affect akin to a combination of delight, sadness, and anxiety, knowing that I've been waiting my entire life for a film to recognize the value of a woman like this and I'm somehow attached to how well the film will be received globally? Am I furious that I haven't felt safe bringing my mother to a movie theater to watch this media, given the possibility that someone might see its audience as a prime target for another act of anti-Asian violence against women? Am I quietly frustrated because I know that we've also both been too busy juggling our own forms of work to find time for this? Or is it just the physical symptoms of Covid-19, which I know I will attempt to downplay, given the fact that I'm at a nationally acclaimed playwrights conference (an opportunity for which I've worked many hours of unpaid labor), and the neoliberal expectations of working artists don't allow for rest? In fact, it is some ineffable combination of all the above, which exemplifies the ways in which all of us, spectators, workers, and would-be resters, must contend with the demands of neoliberalism and its emotional affects.

This dissertation, *The Cost of Work: Performance, Asian Diasporas, and Neoliberalism*, locates itself within the field of theater and performance to consider these women's representational strategies, the implications of these efforts, and their simultaneous emotional and material precarity. My study brings together Asian diasporas, neoliberalism, and performance to intervene in the elisions of Asian diasporic women and to highlight the ways in which neoliberal machinations impact lived experience and affective understandings of self. Examining the contributions of Asian diasporic women through the site of labor in

performance, and the slippages, contradictions, and failures of this labor, makes possible understanding the ways in which neoliberalism molds, limits, and elides Asian diasporic women offstage.

I introduce this study with this film because the narrative, its reception, and Michelle Yeoh's career point to the interrelation of neoliberalism, performance, and Asian diasporas and their stakes. As a Malaysian-born actress who first came to fame in Hong Kong films, Yeoh has had a multi-decade career around the Transpacific. But despite her success as a stuntwoman in films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Yeoh articulates the omission of "ordinary" (which I read as a coded reference to the working class), middle-aged, Asian immigrant women from the global performance market. She says,

When I read the script I thought, this is something. Oh dear. [Yeoh wells up and grabs a tissue to wipe her eyes.] This is something I've been waiting for, for a long time. That's going to give me the opportunity to show my fans, my family, my audience, what I'm capable of. To be funny, to be sad, to be real. Finally, somebody understood that I can do all these things ("Michelle Yeoh..." 17:24).

While Yeoh has achieved material success by many markers (particularly as compared to many of her compatriots), in a recent video interview with the magazine GQ, Yeoh notes the costs of film, and the impact that this labor has had on her family ("Michelle Yeoh..." 16:48). The demands of working on this specific film paid off in capital dividends; the film now serves as production company A24's biggest global hit, grossing over \$100 million in global ticket sales (Rubin). But its global reception has been mixed.⁶

⁶ For example, an international review by a white, British critic misunderstands the cultural specificity of the work. Peter Bradshaw terms a scene where Evelyn fat shames her daughter as "genuinely shocking," instead of recognizing the complex intermingling of immigrant expectations, motherly love and self-reflection, and painfully intimate knowledge that it is. I draw attention to this misunderstanding not to criticize Bradshaw specifically, but to highlight the ways in which the historical omission of these kinds of stories may result in the

The Cost of Work elaborates on the questions raised by the Daniels' film. I name this study as such because it acknowledges the historical impetuses driving Asian diasporic movement (economic opportunity), notes the demands incurred by neoliberalism, and tongue-in-cheek references the frequency with which theater and performance artists colloquially reference the spiritual element of their calling, "The Work." I place these three aspects in conversation with one another to better understand the ways in which neoliberalism operates, as well as the specific affective resonances that it engenders. This project highlights three contemporary representations of key moments in Asian immigrant history, starting from a play on the first official viewing of a Chinese woman on United States soil to the recent moment in which all Transpacific movement come to a stop (the start of Covid-19). Past research, artists, and social media campaigns (such as #representation matters) have argued for increasing Asian American representation in media as a means of asserting Asian American identity, declaring self-worth, and moving towards racial liberation. But this argument has not accounted for the fact the process and the team that go into making them, matter just as much as increasing their quantity.

In three case studies, *The Cost of Work* elucidates the ways in which performance exposes the labor imposed by neoliberalism upon Asian diasporic women and triangulates the resulting emotional resonances. Notably, this dissertation historicizes and understands neoliberalism through its impacts upon these specific subjects, in contrast to their historical elision.⁷ Examining neoliberalism from Asian diasporic women's positionality allows us to

misunderstanding of the complex emotional experience of Asian diasporic women, as well as their possibilities.

⁷ In his forward to George Peffer's book, *If They Don't Bring Their Women Here*, Roger Daniels acknowledges, "Until George Anthony Peffer published an important article about the Page Law of 1875 [which targeted Chinese women] in the *Journal of American Ethnic*

see neoliberalism's "state of emergency" as "not the exception, but the rule," which grounds neoliberalism in its historical conditions, rather than in its philosophy.⁸ It is particularly important to understand the role of Asian diasporic women through the site of labor because magnifying their work asserts the importance and presence of their contributions.

Neoliberalism often operates through the continued invisibility or flattening of information, people, and processes.⁹ Thus, analyzing the presence of world's largest demographic (Asian diasporic women) in performance and media, as well as the material conditions of this work, exposes the underlying tensions of global majority identities and capital, both historically and currently.

Performances can provoke alternative or even reparative images of history. By placing bodies in time and space onstage, we refuse the concealment upon which

History in 1986, most historians who wrote about the anti-Chinese movement, myself included, paid little attention to it. In this we were following the pioneer historian of the anti-Chinese movement Elmer C. Sandmeyer, who made just two brief mentions of it in his monograph *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (1939)" (vii). For an example closer to this dissertation, see the subject of the first chapter, Afong Moy, who disappeared into the annals of history despite her national fame.

⁸ Here, I am in conversation with Benjamin, who writes, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical" (Benjamin 257).

⁹ For example, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey writes, "The neoliberal presumption of perfect information [for agents acting in the market] and a level playing field for competition appears as either innocently utopian or a deliberate obfuscation of processes that will lead to the concentration of wealth and, therefore, the restoration of class power" (68). See also the second chapter of this book, which argues that "to understand the construction of political consent, we must learn to extract political meanings from their cultural integuments" (39-40). In other words, as he goes on to argue, corporations, the media, think tanks, and various institutions created support for neoliberalism by disguising its brutality.

neoliberalism feeds, and refute valuing a more privileged lived experience over another. We also deny the disassociation of these experiences and instead, draw attention to the connections between the two. When scholarship does not recognize the work that Asian diasporic women contribute, we value products over people and perpetuate the commodification of minoritized people that neoliberalism already deploys. When Asian diasporic women are continually objectified and stereotyped through stories, stages, and screens, as well as the process that brings these stories to light, we delegitimize the importance and validity of their perspectives and bodies.

Therefore, I argue that the analyzing the ways in which performances are made is key to understanding what performances are created, or, more simply, understanding better the ways in which process determines product. I also argue that how these stories are consumed and the limitations and stakes of these representations shape the treatment of global majority bodies. The violence against Asian diasporic women has historically been more obliquely perpetuated through Transpacific legislation, flows of capital and trade, and global sites of labor such as Southeast Asian sweatshops. But while it may have been easier to disassociate from the stakes of this violence before, devastatingly, the increased violence of the last three years, now witnessed on street corners and caught on security camera footage, make clear the stakes of the resulting dehumanization.

Neoliberalism and Performance, Neoliberalism in Performance

Theorizing neoliberalism in performance is particularly important because this scholarship contributes to our understandings of the neoliberal subject. The institutions that support performance often perpetuate and therefore reveal the machinations of neoliberalism.

Artists continually present new and more complex definitions of neoliberalism, and the labor of creating performance offers one avenue for pushing against neoliberal conditions. *The Cost of Work* intervenes in contemporary studies of neoliberalism by centering performances of Asian diasporic women; not only does this focus separate my study from previous theater and performance scholarship on neoliberalism, but it also distinguishes it in Theater and Performance studies.

While scholars have previously addressed the ways in which performances illuminate neoliberal legislation (and its impacts), values, and affects in Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and the United Kingdom, these studies have yet to meaningfully engage with these foci in terms of Asian diasporic women.¹⁰ Before I further discuss performance and neoliberalism, I introduce Marxist geographer David Harvey's definition of neoliberalism below, as Harvey's study functions as *the* touchstone for theater, performance, and feminist studies that focus countries who are widely recognized as early adoptees of neoliberalism.¹¹

While I follow contemporary scholarship in acknowledging the chimerical, situationally specific nature of neoliberalism, both build upon and argue against Harvey's argument that neoliberalism is a political project created to re-establish the capital accumulation and power of economic elites.¹² Harvey locates the start of neoliberalism in

¹⁰ Previous scholarship on neoliberalism and performance such as Jen Harvie's *Fair Play*, Nicholas Ridout's *Passionate Amateurs*, and Hillary Miller's *Drop Dead*, have predominantly (though not exclusively) focused on the experiences of white middle- and upper-class Americans and Europeans; Patricia Ybarra's *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism* examines the titular population; Jisha Menon's *Brutal Beauty* highlights the experience of urban Indians (and beyond). Intersections of affect and neoliberalism have been well covered by Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011).

¹¹ These countries include the United Kingdom, the United States, and China.

¹² As Menon writes in 2013, "It is now commonplace to assert that there is no singular or univocal 'neoliberalism.' While it is a global phenomenon, it is also constantly differentiated, unsystematic, and impure, inflected by existing arrangements of culture and society. It is not

the 1970s, framing the United States' 1973 intervention in Chile's government as the first experiment with neoliberal state formation (7). According to Harvey, the success of this "experiment," combined with the global recession in the 1970s and its accompanying rising unemployment and inflation, sets the stage for all human action to be brought into the market (3). While the performance discussed in my first chapter shows that neoliberal affective resonances have existed for Asian diasporic women since their first arrival in the United States, rather than since the 1970s, this dissertation takes up Harvey's argument that neoliberalism leads to "the financialization of everything" (33). Harvey considers how neoliberal legislation leads to the privatization of natural resources and other, tangible, undiscovered markets; I build on his work and expand considerations of neoliberalism by considering the ways in which performances reveal the process of neoliberalism financializing our minds, bodies, and imaginations through affects, labor, and care networks.

This study builds on previous scholarship on neoliberal affects to address frameworks of being, understanding, and imagining. As Margaret Thatcher famously declared, "economics are the method but the object is to change the soul" (Harvey 23). I build upon Wendy Brown's articulation of *homo oeconomicus*, which views neoliberalism as "a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms" (17). I also place Asian diasporic women's experiences at the center of my definition, identifying neoliberalism as a system of economic, institutional, and affective exploitation that seeks to consume, aestheticize, devalue, and elide marginalized populations, wielded by a global few.

only diverse geographically and historically; it also has remarkable plasticity to reinvent itself in shifting guises as it manifests in discursive formulations, economic policies modes of governance, and material and cultural practices" (13).

As I focus on the labor imposed by neoliberalism throughout my chapters, I build on performance scholars who argue that neoliberalism is not just a series of guiding principles for economic legislation, but also a philosophical, emotional, and cultural project. In her earlier work, Jisha Menon uses the lens of a Bangalore-based production of *The Cherry Orchard* to theorize neoliberalism as a “structure of feeling” that aims to dominate internal and external systems of life (239). In her more recent 2013 publication, Menon takes up the ways in which neoliberalism creates affects again, though this time she frames neoliberalism as an aesthetic project. With Bangalore as an analytical paradigm of “the global city,” the artworks she discusses critically engage “*anesthetized*, routinized, and celebratory discourses of the world-class city and explore the promise and perils of such urban transformations” (22: 8). Menon takes a broad view of performance, examining pieces from experimental live media performance to sculpture and photography. But each chapter of Menon’s work takes up a specific affective orientation, ranging from urban panic in response to development and reterritorialization of space in Bangalore to narcissism “as a technology of self-dissolution,” as her protagonists reveal the dreamscapes, actions, and passions that drive “their performances of survival in the city” (17-20).

In contrast to Menon, this dissertation does not center around forms of performed urbanity and globality. But parallel to Menon’s consideration of how the aesthetic project of neoliberalism crafts the self, I take on a variety of affective resonances as well, centering these resonances around questions of how the labor of neoliberalism crafts the self as an economic actor (Menon 14). While Patricia Ybarra’s area of focus is not directly in conversation with Asian geographies (in contrast to Menon’s focus on South East Asia and mine on the Transpacific), I also build on Ybarra’s work analyzing the ways in which

performance articulates the impacts of neoliberal global flows. Asian diasporic performance, I argue, is a particularly rich area from which to approach studies of neoliberalism, as Asian diasporic performances provide us with new insight into the ways in which neoliberalism has historically disciplined the lives and psyches of minoritized people, and will continue to do so in the future.

While Ybarra and I have different geographical research areas, in many ways, my study emulates Ybarra's model of the nexus of performance and neoliberalism. Firstly, I follow Ybarra's framework in that she, too, looks at diasporic playwrights now in the United States, whose work, she believes, reveals the painful impact and trauma of neoliberalism; Ybarra's work considers how Latinx playwrights (in the United States) have purposefully and inadvertently theorized neoliberal tendencies, effects, and policies. Notably, Ybarra does not examine performances that stake a claim on Latinx identity. Following Ybarra, my chapters address work by Asian diasporic playwrights, but these works focus on issues of labor, exploitation, and neoliberal complicity; the engine of these performances incorporate and acknowledge but do not focus upon a specific delineation of ethnic identity. Secondly, the performances under Ybarra's examination are often transnational, incorporating both "precarious trips across the ocean *and* quotidian modes of migration and movement," particularly the performances in her second chapter (75, her italics). Similarly, my work deals with continues flows of people, goods, and capital. Thirdly, in terms of methodology, both Ybarra and I use dramaturgical analysis as a primary method of inquiry. Ybarra's sense of dramaturgy is capacious, incorporating both traditional theatre dramaturgy (i.e., textual analysis) and an examination of the implications of larger cultural understandings,

stereotypes, and performative forms. She believes – as my work also implicitly argues – that playwrights are theorists.

Ybarra and I differ in our approaches to neoliberalism, as we grapple with two different historical contexts. While she acknowledges that “capitalism has always been transnational and global,” ultimately, Ybarra argues that the current state of capitalism (neoliberalism) is unique. She states,

What marks a difference in contemporary times is the combination of the escalation of the horrific working conditions in much of the Third World and Global South, the dismantling of the welfare state in the First World, and the consequential increased prosperity for an ever-smaller elite group of speculative professionals as beneficiaries of the system (5).

An in-depth, historical argument (akin to Foucault’s work on neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics*) comparing the difference in global economics between Latin America in the 1970s and Transpacific interests in the 1970s is not the focus of this dissertation.¹³ However, in contrast to Ybarra, the performance examined in my first chapter frames neoliberalism as an affective template which can be engaged in both the contemporary moment and more historically, dating back to the arrival of Asian diasporic women in the United States. This performance, as well as my analysis of it, follows Joshua Chambers-Letson’s theorization that “as performance shuttles between past and present, rearranging the spaces that divide them in the process, it rips open history and disorganizes our movements through time and space” (14). In other words, parts of this dissertation argue that performance operates as

¹³ For studies of Transpacific flows of culture, capital, and labor, see work such as *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, edited by Janet Hoskins and Viet Nguyen; *Transpacific Networks and a New History of Globalization* by Peter E. Hamilton; Yên Lê Espiritu’s “Critical Refugee Studies and Native Pacific Studies: A Transpacific Critique,” and others. For a history of global economics in Latin America in the second half of the 20th century, see Eliana Cardoso and Albert Fishlow’s “Latin American Economic Development: 1950–1980.”

historiographic intervention, denying audience members and readers a linear sense of time, forcing them to question narratives of progress.¹⁴ Thus, this dissertation illuminates the ways in which neoliberal affects are not easily located as emerging from the 1960s. Nonetheless, I follow Ybarra in positing theater artists as theorists of neoliberalism. I also follow her in arguing that while artists of color should be centered as knowledge producers, we must simultaneously push against “outdated ethnographic frames” that privilege ideas of “authenticity and content producers” (10).

Asian Diasporic Women and Transpacific Flows

In this study, I use the term “Asian diaspora” to frame flows of movement, bodies, and capital around the Transpacific. While historian Yuji Ichioka articulated the term “Asian American” in the 1960s as a rejection of the racist and imperialist “Oriental,” I do not use this terminology because the Asian women the performances studied in these chapters do not necessarily identify as Asian American (E. Lee 7). Instead, these works often implicitly draw attention to the ways in which “Americanness” is contingent. Moreover, the portrayal of these women reveals the ways in which these flows do not halt in the United States, but rather, shift continuously around the both the location and imaginary of the Transpacific.

Previous scholarship on Asian diasporas has historically centered an acknowledgement of movement. For example, David Palumbo-Liu uses the term “Asian/American” to mark “*both* the distinction installed between ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ *and* a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive moment” (1). Aihwa Ong uses the framework of

¹⁴ Again, see chapter 1 for more of this argument.

“transnational logics” to bring together the economic rationalities of globalization and the cultural dynamics that shape human and political responses (5). Though there has been a “‘diaspora’ diaspora,” stretching the claims and stance of the term, “diaspora” nonetheless remains a touchstone for contemporary studies of transpacific movement and performance (Brubaker 1). In his introduction to *Transpacific Studies*, Viet Nguyen uses “diaspora” to build the analytic of transpacific studies as one which re-envision history, considering both sides of the Pacific from the perspective of those who have moved (11). In other words, using the terms “Transpacific” and “Asian diasporas” does not just acknowledge the continuing history of movement, but it also decenters the West as a location of geographic, intellectual, or national aspiration towards which subjects should strive.

Asian diasporas around the Transpacific have been motivated by colonial and military occupation, (theoretical) freedom from persecution, and often, compelled by economic need. As a result, streams of South, East, and Southeast Asian laborers have flowed to Transpacific locations including the Caribbean, Cuba, Peru, and other areas in Latin America.¹⁵ Asian immigrants have also historically found ways into the United States, regardless of whether U.S. legislation has sanctioned their arrival or continued presence. These influxes of bodies, culture, and goods have been shaped by see-sawing needs of national labor and ensuing xenophobic legislation. Because the United States historically privileged the presence of Asian diasporic men (due to their viability as cheap labor),¹⁶ established histories of Asian

¹⁵ See Sean Metzger’s *The Chinese Atlantic* for more on these movements.

¹⁶ For example, the passage of the 1875 Page Act precluded most Asian women’s immigration; the act denied entry to all Asian women suspected of prostitution, and successfully denying this claim was almost impossible for Asian women to prove. While the more expansive Chinese Exclusion Act followed less than a decade later, the United States first denied entry to Asian diasporic women’s bodies and presence.

immigration into the U.S. and Canada have predominantly focused on men.¹⁷ Just as scholars have also been “slow to critically understand” the contributions and resistance of immigrant Asian women, theater texts and the canonization of these texts has focused on Asian diasporic men’s work (Võ and Sciachitano xi).¹⁸

The experiences, labor, and value of Asian diasporic women continue to be elided and devalued. To return to *Everything*, Evelyn may be responsible for simultaneously juggling cross-cultural family relationships, running a small family business, navigating the small business’s finances through government bureaucracy, planning a New Year’s party, and caretaking her father, but both she and others, such as her husband’s multiverse equivalent, see her as a failure; when Alphaverse Waymond tells her, “With every passing moment, you fear you might have missed your chance to make something of your life. I’m here to tell you, every rejection, every disappointment has led you here,” he is affirming the possibility that she could still be great (*Everything* 22:14). But this very affirmation also negates all the invisible skills and labor that Evelyn already accomplishes, and the meaning that she might have made from these. This experience of invisible labor has also translated

¹⁷ For more on the waves of Asian immigration to the United States and Canada, see David Palumbo-Liu’s *Asian/American*; Xiaojian Zhao’s *Remaking Chinese America*; and Erika Lee’s chapter, “A Nation of Immigrants” and book, *The Making of Asian American*, among others.

¹⁸ Asian American history has been associated with a kind of hyper-masculine focus. See, for example, early, celebrated Asian American writers include John Okada (*No-No Boy*), Louis Chu (*Eat A Bowl of Tea*), and Daniel Okimoto (*American in Disguise*). This emphasis is particularly demonstrated by the editors of “Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers.” In response to their introductory essay, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong writes, “Frank Chin and his coeditors operate on the premise that a true Asian American sensibility is non-Christian, nonfeminine, and nonimmigrant” (8). While other scholars and artists pushed against this sentiment, and the editors’ sentiments may have been intended as more of a, nonetheless, Frank Chin, his compatriots, and their particular breed of toxic masculinity helped define Asian America as it initially came into cultural consciousness.

into a historical dearth of representation for both Asian diasporic and Asian American women.

This dissertation intervenes in these omissions, highlighting the theoretical contributions that Asian diasporic female artists make towards our understandings of neoliberalism, as well as our attempts to navigate its chimerical oppression. I argue that Asian diasporic women have operated under and through the machinations of neoliberalism, far before the neoliberal markers such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Reagan's slashed tax rates, or the economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping's leadership came into effect.¹⁹

Discipline-defining scholars such as Lisa Lowe and Josephine Lee have focused on questions of citizenship, model minority status, and resistance to stereotypes.²⁰ Rather than delineate the boundaries of Asian diasporic identity, *The Cost of Work* focuses on the ways that performance animates and perpetuates flexible negotiations of capital and work around the Pacific. Governments, economic policies, and artistic institutions have historically and currently perpetuated neoliberal violence around the Transpacific.²¹ In this study, I explore the ways in which performances operate as microcosms for explicating this violence, and for imagining more just and equitable practices which undermine such violence. As such, this dissertation draws on Asian diasporic theories, such as those of Aihwa Ong and Anne Anlin

¹⁹ For more on Reagan's tax rates, see Harvey's figure showing tax cuts from 70 to 28 percent (26).

²⁰ See Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* and Lee's *Performing Asian America*.

²¹ Such scholarship includes Harvey's chapter, "Neoliberalism 'with Chinese Characteristics,'" p. 120-151 (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism*); Lei Zhang's article, "The Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992: Student Immigration and the Transpacific Neoliberal Model Minority"; Jini Kim Watson's "Postscript: On Transpacific Futurities"; and Christine Mok and Aimee Bahng's "Transpacific Overtures: An Introduction," among others.

Cheng, that connect economic legislation to lived experience and theorize the costs of living a minoritized identity through affect.

In today's world, anthropologists and contemporary historians note that flows around the Transpacific continue. Erika Lee asserts that contemporary Asian Americans "are simultaneously racial minorities within nations, transnational immigrants who engage in two or more homelands, and diasporic citizens making connections across borders" ("The Making" 33). As Peggy Levitt writes, many contemporary immigrants refuse to "trade in their home country membership for an American one" (12). Instead, they participate in multiple countries – and therefore multiple economies – at the same time. Aihwa Ong argues that governments, as well as individuals, have a flexible understanding of citizenship and sovereignty as a strategy to accumulate capital and power (6). Asian diasporic theater artists, who would not previously have been allowed entry, now hold the possibility of being granted a work visa in the United States (though it is a particularly fraught and arduous legal process). However, while their movement around the Transpacific has continued to increase since the 1960s, this movement has not necessarily equated to more visibility and material empowerment for Asian diasporic women. To re-insert Asian diasporic women, I focus on their representation and the production of such representation through the site of labor.

Material Feminism and Theatrical Labor

The principles of material feminism which attend to "the material complexity, reality, and agency" of women's bodies and lives undergird this dissertation; these principles lead me to analyze the kinds of labor that Asian diasporic women have performed, the labor required for stage performances, and the overlap between the two (Mohanty 510). I deploy

the term “material feminism,” as it applies broadly to feminist scholars who simultaneously analyze issues of class and gender within their specific discipline. As Silvia Federici reminds us, the human body was the first machine developed by capitalism (146). Analyzing labor (as a relation of class) is particularly generative, for, as Kathi Weeks reminds us, “the wage relation generates not just income and capital, but disciplined individuals, governable subjects, worthy citizens, and responsible family members” (8). In other words, forms of labor and their accompanying environments operate as locations where categorizations of identity are enforced, performed, and created. Work can liberate the self from these markers of identity and worth, but it can also tie one more closely to them. As such, labor is not just a site of complex social exchanges, but can also be a site of identity formation, too – sometimes the self undergoes a process of self-actualization or self-disciplining through the work itself.

Analyzing labor through the lens of Asian diasporic women is particularly fraught, given the ways in which they are assessed through their adherence to specific forms of labor. Lisa Lowe declares that “Asian immigrant and Asian American women are not simply the most recent formulation within the genealogy of Asian American racialization; they, along with women working in the ‘third world,’ are the ‘new’ workforce within the global reorganization of capitalism” (Lowe 158). Miliann Kang further clarifies Lowe’s belief, arguing that “the terms of Asian women’s racial acceptance require their enactment of forms of femininity grounded in subservient work” (5). Thus, Asian diasporic women must negotiate (and have always negotiated) intersecting and shifting dynamics; they are expected to perform multiple and specific kinds of feminized labor, and to perform it with a smile. As *Everything* shows us, this negotiation can result in the elision of the Asian diasporic female

subject. Whether Evelyn is running out the door to ensure a customer is invited to the laundromat's Chinese New Year party, or is ingratiating herself to an IRS inspector amidst an audit, the people she encounters all casually ignore her until she contradicts their expectations of pleasant submission, at which point they become irascible or irate.

Asian diasporic and transnational scholars who invoke material feminism often highlight that the local is the site in which the global plays out. Chandra Mohanty's work implicitly uses historical materialism as "a basic framework and a definition of material reality in both its local and micro-, as well as global, systemic dimensions" (501). Shahrzad Mojab notes that (personal) stories can provide evidence about the ways in which resistance against patriarchy in specific countries are inseparable from the rest of the world, despite not identifying as a performance scholar (18).

Material feminists, alongside scholars of Asian America and diasporas, also note the importance of addressing contradictions and disparities within narratives and communities, as well as between groups of women. Mohanty, for example, emphasizes the "specificity of difference," charging scholars to articulate differences in power among various communities of women (502). I heed both Mohanty's call and Lowe's concern that Asian immigrant identity is broadly understood as a monolith; as such, I theorize representations of Asian diasporic women through their various heterogeneities, hybridities, and multiplicities (Lowe 61). By specifying the difference between populations and time periods, I better explore the connections of exploitative labor and traumatic affect between them. I use specific performances to illuminate universal dynamics. While material feminists often focus upon the "real and concrete" effects on global restructuring upon women, here, I expand this focus

to consider artistic production and thus, identify the key role of artistic performance in identity and community formation (Mohanty 516).

In the following chapters, I build upon material feminists' occupation with labor by querying the labor required to negotiate these concrete effects, and then articulating the emotional engagements that emerge through and from these negotiations, as well as through and from performance. Here, I follow Dorinne Kondo, who looks at both the work of (theatrical) creativity, and their resulting affects. Kondo's discussion of the production of race is unique; she argues that, as artists work to craft theatrical worlds, they also make and unmake race (25). As she considers forms of labor including spectatorship, dramaturgy, performance, and playwrighting, Kondo notes the accompanying racial affects, or the "power-laden zone[s] where subjects, feeling, and structural violence intertwine" (15). Importantly, while her examinations begin inside the theater, Kondo extends her argument to move outside of performance spaces. She asserts that "making 'the world of the play' can offer opportunities to make/unmake/remake worlds inside and outside the theater" (53). Similarly, this dissertation highlights the ways that performance reveals the emotional disciplining that Asian diasporic women experience inside and outside of the rehearsal room. Moreover, this dissertation also follows Kondo in highlighting the role of the playwright and their dramaturgical conversation. On a more personal note, regardless of whether this dissertation is always explicitly in conversation with Kondo, the spirit of her work permeates this monograph because it articulates and theorizes the experiences I have had as a spectator (as I detailed earlier during my viewing of *Everything*), in addition to those I have had as a dramaturg and director.

In my directing practice, I have also encountered many “power-laden zones” and struggled to parse the overlap between the interpersonal dynamics of my discomfort and structural source of my unease. When watching scenes I’d crafted, I wondered if audiences were laughing out of discomfort, or if their laughter reproduced hierarchical power relations and perpetuated “affective violence” (11)? Was a South East Asian actor breaking down in my rehearsal room because the material triggered an association with their family’s experience of genocide or because I, as a young, femme, Asian director, gave a note that triggered a past experience of belittlement? Or because of something else entirely?

My positionality as a freelance working artist imbues this inquiry, galvanizing its lens of theatrical labor. While I do not directly incorporate practice as research, analyses continuously bring both dramaturgical inquiry and an exploration of production elements. I return to these production elements because they signify the visible, coalesced form of the hidden labor that creates them. As a director whose work is often assessed through its absence (or its disappearance into a larger, cohesive vision), I know that in analyzing production elements, we undermine a historic artistic hierarchy that lauds the packaged art product over the collaboration of the creative team and the contributions of staff.

It is particularly important to interrogate theatrical labor because a critical analysis of the artistic process inherently argues that artist practices must be valued as equal to or worthier than the art product.²² Because neoliberalism often operates through prevarication

²² When I say that my work is often assessed through its absence, I mean that in contrast to an auteur director, who would theoretically impose a vision onto designers and actors, my best work occurs when it amplifies others’ talents. For example, a playwright’s script might become tighter, an actor’s performance more impactful, or a designer’s choice more clear. Audience members watching these shows would likely credit the playwright, actor, or designer; hence, my work is often assessed through its disappearance.

and obfuscation, examining multiple forms of theatrical labor, which itself is often hidden in the offstage wings, offsite construction builds, or in pre- and post-rehearsal hours, makes possible new understandings of neoliberal strategies, histories, and resulting resonances. These specific forms of labor in theater and performance include the work of deep listening, audience spectatorship, the physicality of performance and backstage labor, the emotional labor of engaging the audience's imagination, and more.²³ As such, the following chapters recognize and analyze quotidian labor in a multiplicity of forms, including wage-earning work, domestic work, and care networks. I discuss representations of labor in parallel to the labor of the productions themselves, which in turn, provokes a reparative assertion of Asian diasporic women's historical presence, theoretical contributions, and material experience, despite their neoliberal constraints.

Ensuing Chapters

I organize this discussion around three contemporary representations of Transpacific movement and labor. Each performance notes a unique turning point in Asian diasporic history. Therefore, each chapter addresses neoliberalism through a different affective resonance and form of labor.²⁴ Because we change countries of origin and ethnic background, each chapter introduces its own historical and theoretical context so that readers can attenuate to the changing stakes of different populations. Methodologically, I interpret

²³ See Butterwick and Selman for more on "deep listening".

²⁴ To be clear, the Auntie Sewing Squad has stopped sewing masks but still occasionally organizes or sews under the Auntie Sewing Squad Banner, as when Auntie Michael sewed a large "Livable Wages" banner for UCLA students to hang during the November 2022 UAW strike.

the text, as well as performances' mise en scene.²⁵ Where appropriate, I also integrate performance reviews, box office sales, interviews, and my own directing practice. Overall, I argue that performances illuminate and challenge neoliberalism by elucidating its' material effects and affective resonances upon Asian diasporic women, both those who are previously (and thus, immigrant) and currently located around the Transpacific. I explicate how theater and the performance industry simultaneously empowers and diminishes Asian diasporic women while they also serve as economic drivers. Because bodies, capital, and performance flow flexibly around the world, I use a Transpacific lens which integrates the movement of people across the Pacific and their accompanying cultural, monetary, and legal contexts to map the ensuing effects of this flux.

Chapter one theorizes the neoliberal gaze through Lloyd Suh's *The Chinese Lady* (2018). The titular character of Suh's play, which has been widely produced in the last year, imagines the internal monologue of the first Asian diasporic woman on record to set foot on United States soil: Afong Moy (Tran). While Moy's fate is lost to history, we know that Moy was trafficked from Guangzhou province by two merchants (the Carnes) as a form of marketing for the Carnes' purchasable goods. By imagining her life, Suh offers her a form of historical redress and honors the labor Moy performs in attempting to listen to the audience, convince them of her worth, and perform diplomacy between the United States and China. Simultaneously, Suh renders the audience complicit in perpetuating the affective template of the neoliberal gaze: a repertoire of attitudes and locations that has become naturalized and, as such, seems to work by itself.²⁶ Following Karen Shimakawa, I read the politics of embodied

²⁵ In this, I am inspired by Karen Shimikawa's methodological approach in *National Abjection*.

²⁶ My thanks to Dr. Leo Cabranes-Grant for his insightful phrasing.

racial identity onstage. *The Chinese Lady* calls attention to the ways in which this template operates, but the play does not merely de-familiarize certain assumptions. Instead, the play also re-enacts the process of being turned into an Ornamental object, to use the term of Anne Anlin Cheng, forcing different audiences to contend with their roles in this process. As such, *The Chinese Lady* posits the diasporic Asian woman as a prototypical neoliberal subject, which then also posits neoliberalism as a series of historical acts dating back to the 1800s, while also locating the process of engaging with such a neoliberal subject as ongoing. This chapter ends with a brief analysis of directing *The Chinese Lady*, wherein I grapple with the experience of my own complicity in perpetuating the neoliberal gaze, as I crafted the play in 2019.

Chapter two coheres psychic and material experiences through onstage and offstage labor to articulate a second effect of neoliberalism in Celine Song's *Endlings*: the commodification of self. *Endlings* juxtaposes the impacts of the *haenyeos*' (traditionally, indigenous Korean female sea divers) physical labor and the Korean diasporic playwrights' intellectual labor. Because offstage labor replicates onstage labor, *Endlings*' onstage labor expresses the impossibility of existing outside neoliberalism. But it also addresses the affective dislocation the playwright feels in New York, as well as her bottomless desire to "succeed." Here, the institution of theatre is revealed as a participant in crafting the illusion of Berlant's "good life" (2). I also integrate a rebuttal of Jesse Green's review of *Endlings*, as I argue that this review is indicative of a historical perspective that assesses performance by playwrights of color in relation to whiteness. Similarly, at times, I argue, the mise en scène of the piece over-romanticizes the labor in *Endlings*, creating magical ethnic moments. As such, *Endlings* clarifies not just the stakes of Asian diasporic women's movement, but also the

ways in which the industry of theatre in the United States encourage artists to self-commodify, and the personal stakes of participating in this neoliberal affect.

Chapter three analyzes Kristina Wong's *Sweatshop Overlord* to highlight the ways in which Wong's articulation of Auntie Sewing Squad's labor expands definitions of feminist caretaking, and to theorize performance itself as a form of caretaking. This care, I argue, operates as resistance to neoliberalism. In Wong's performance, part performance art event, part theater piece, she dramatizes her experience of founding and then leading the Auntie Sewing Squad, a network of (initially) Asian Aunties who sew masks when Covid 19 explodes and China's usual export of surgical masks to the United States slows to a trickle. The Aunties continue the historical inheritance of sewing as Asian feminized labor to create cloth masks for at-risk populations in need, ranging from urban healthcare workers to the Navajo nation, and eventually expand this care outside of mask making. In her performance, I argue that Wong expands the usual foci of care by using performance to perform care for the audience. I identify three new care tactics: humor, the labor as is shown through set aesthetics and text, and audience engagement. While these tactics are not exclusive to feminist care, Wong is unique in deploying them to expand the care initially enacted by the Auntie Sewing Squad. By turning the audience towards relations of community relations and inter-dependence, acts of self-care, and affects of communal pleasure, Wong provides a framework for pushing against neoliberal mentalities of consumerism and individualism.

As we teeter on the edge of a new global recession, continue to witness the increase in racial violence against Asian diasporic bodies, and see the real-time demise of theatres (particularly theatres that encourage new narratives) across the United States and internationally, it grows ever more important to address how narratives of Asian diasporic

individuals are transmitted both within theatre and within the theatre of global East/West relations because performances shape the treatment of Asian diasporic bodies.²⁷ *The Cost of Work* addresses the forces that buttress and shape these narratives, draws attention to the impact upon individuals whose existence is often elided, elucidates the costs of this quick money and easy exploitation, and ultimately, provides a blueprint for better understanding the exploitative machinations of neoliberalism. In other words, this project explores how performances of neoliberalism force us to contend with its price tag upon our bodies, minds, and collective imaginaries. Thus, I consider how performances illuminate individual and institutional complicity in neoliberalism, making us responsible to those who were elided by this exploitation in the past – and to those who might be, in the future.

²⁷ Consider, for example, the recent closing of San Diego Repertory, Southern Rep, the Sundance Theatre Program, and the indefinite pause placed upon Actors Theatre of Louisville' Humana Festival of New American Plays.

Chapter 1: **Viewing and Consuming *The Chinese Lady***

Since Covid-19 erupted, Asian Americans have experienced a stark and virulent rise in violence. A study, for example, by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, tallied anti-Asian hate crimes as increasing 189% in the first quarter of 2021, as compared to 2020 (“Anti-Asian Hate Crime Reported to Police”). Other news sources state that anti-Asian acts of violence have increased upwards of 339% (Yam). The national coalition, Stop AAPI Hate, which tracks incidents of violence and discrimination against Asians, notes that out of all of the hate incidents reported throughout the U.S., 61.8%, were perpetrated against AAPI women; within their specific racial identification, AAPI women report more harassment (69.8%) than AAPI men or non-binary people (Yellow Horse et al. 2-3). In their most recent survey, the National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum reports that 74% of their surveyed Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders women reported experiencing racism and/or discrimination over the last twelve months (“The State of Safety”). In other words, Asian American bodies, and Asian American women’s bodies, are specifically targeted. Even as these numbers illuminate the violence against Asian women, in all likelihood, acts of violence, discrimination, shunning, and harassment occur much more frequently than reported (Ramakrishnan et al.).

But while Covid-19 (and the accompanying xenophobic anti-Asian rhetoric) may have exacerbated acts of anti-Asian violence, this violence and the sentiments underlying it are nothing new. In fact, ever since the first (recorded) woman, Afong Moy, stepped foot on United States (U.S.) soil, Asian women have been targets of racialized misogyny here. Lloyd

Suh's recent play, *The Chinese Lady*, explores Afong Moy's journey, and her individual navigation of this racialized gaze.

In November 2018, Barrington Stage Company (Barrington) and Ma-Yi Theater Company co-produced the world premiere of Lloyd Suh's *The Chinese Lady* (*TCL*) at Barrington in July 2018. After its Massachusetts run, the production moved to New York City, where it was deemed a New York Times Critic's Pick. In February 2019, Milwaukee Rep opened *TCL* in the Midwest; later that year, in September, Artists At Play and Greenway Court co-produced the West Coast premiere in Los Angeles; in ensuing months, *TCL* played at Magic Theatre in San Francisco. Various productions were reviewed as "utterly unforgettable" (Lawler); a "quiet play [that] steadily deepens in complexity... [an] extraordinary play" ("A 'Chinese Lady' on Heart-Rending Display"); and a reframing of "colonialism and sexism" (Janiak). In short, *TCL* had a successful first year of productions, opening in multiple United States regions at theatres of varying sizes. Then the pandemic hit.

Over two years later, *TCL* has become one of the most widely produced plays in America. As Diep Tran writes, "Though TCG and *American Theatre* did not create an official Top 10 Plays list for the 2021-22 season, its data shows that *The Chinese Lady* will be the most-produced play at TCG member theatres throughout the U.S." Part of this popularity is likely due to the small (two-person) cast size, which helps reduce concerns of Covid transmission. But its popularity is also likely due to the fact that *TCL* reminds audiences of the historical roots of contemporary anti-Asian violence, particularly against women. In other words, *TCL* reframes contemporary manifestations of anti-Asian violence as temporally cyclical and highlights the consumptive factors that lead to the continuation of this violence.

The Chinese Lady (TCL) follows Afong Moy, the first Asian female on record to arrive in the United States. In the first scene, we are in 1834, looking into The Room, which is filled with Chinoiserie.²⁸ Fourteen year old Afong nervously and excitedly introduces herself to us. She's happy to ignore (or chastise) her translator, Atung, and acknowledges her "duty" to show us "things that are exotic, and foreign, and unusual," including her bound feet, how-to eat with chopsticks, and the pouring of tea (Suh 2). The following six scenes follow the same pattern of declaration and presentation, to varying degrees. In the second scene, two years later, Afong is proud that she has become of the most successful exhibitions in the history of Peale's museum. She feels the responsibility of representing Chinese customs and providing an "exchange of ideas and practices around the globe" (Suh 13). In the third scene, the turning point of the play, Afong and Atung re-enact her exchange with President Andrew Jackson; though Afong does not understand what the audience does (Jackson's mockery of her), some part of her senses his disdain, and she begins to question where she belongs. The scene ends with Atung's dream. He breaks the fourth wall, relishing, manipulating, and confronting the audience's gaze as he shares (some of) his secret desires.

In the fourth scene, a drunken Afong knows that, after her experience of being the butt of Jackson's jokes, she can no longer trust the audience's gaze. She simultaneously provokes and educates the audience before declaring that she's leaving the exhibit to find more Chinese in America. In the fifth scene, we discover that Afong never left the exhibit. Now, as a forty-four-year-old woman, she is being replaced a younger woman. Atung, however, is staying: his services as a translator are still required.

²⁸ Suh capitalizes The Room in its first mentions in the script.

In the last scene of the play, Afong races through decades. As we sit in the final moments, Afong returns to a simplified version of her opening scene ritual. This time, she tell us, “It is a beautiful thing to look at something long enough to really understand it. But it is so much more beautiful to be looked at long enough to be understood” (Such 43). She waits onstage, willing us to meet her gaze as the play comes to a close.

In this chapter, I argue that *TCL* refracts neoliberalism by instructing the audience in a specific form of spectatorship that encourages us to consume her: the neoliberal gaze. In illuminating this gaze, *TCL* revises understandings of the past to create an alternative history of neoliberalism; this history calls attention to the ways in which diasporic Asian women have always been enmeshed within neoliberalism because of their perceived objecthood. As such, Suh refutes definitions of neoliberalism as a contemporary phenomenon. *TCL* helps us to define “neoliberalism” as historical acts that privilege international profit over human concerns, to the point that subject’s humanity is dismissed and instead, replaced with aesthetic value.

Because he addresses neoliberalism as a form of spectatorship and thus, as a historical phenomenon, Suh sutures the violence of audiences engaging with diasporic Asian stereotypes to the continued physical violence against diasporic Asian bodies. By casting us as her audience, we are privy to offstage characters’ treatment of *TCL*’s titular character, Afong Moy. This casting teaches us how to view her and shows the inescapable nature of the neoliberal gaze. Her accommodation of our curiosity is enforced, and her obligingness is expected. These audience expectations dismiss the labor of diplomacy, relationship-building, and active listening. Suh intervenes then, by drawing attention to both the work that Afong performs, and the work that the neoliberal gaze – our consumptive gaze – does on her.

Moreover, by focusing on the story of a diasporic Asian woman, he highlights the gendered dynamics of neoliberalism, in which women are disproportionately impacted (as the introductory statistics show).

What does it look like to cultivate, draw attention towards, and then undo a neoliberal gaze in a customer? And how might theatre and performance play a role in both revealing neoliberalism's effects? *The Chinese Lady* offers a fruitful lens through which to consider these questions, as Afong demarcates the first (recorded) instance of an Asian diasporic woman in the United States; she operates synecdochically for ensuing Asian diasporic women. Treating Asian diasporic women as objects, *TCL* reveals, leads these women to diminish themselves so far that they disappear. In other words, once we have consumed all that Asian diasporic women can offer, they erase themselves, thus becoming the ideal neoliberal subject. While neoliberal relations often operate by obscuring themselves, instead, Suh highlights both the act and the impact of the labor that goes into these relations. When we place Asian diasporic women at the center of a conversation about neoliberalism, we find that the neoliberal values of international profit over subjecthood, as well as the elision of interpersonal labor, have always existed for minoritized bodies. As such, Suh posits the diasporic Asian woman as *the* prototypical neoliberal subject.²⁹

While this chapter develops its argumentation in several sections, it also operates cyclically. At times, text and characters recur, just as they appear in *TCL*, and just as *TCL* shows they operate historically. Ensuing sections include: a summary, the historical and theoretical contexts, a dramaturgical and theoretical analysis of the neoliberal gaze, and

²⁹ Harvey and most neoliberal scholars place the seeds of neoliberalism in the 1960s.

finally, a brief consideration of the ways in which my own production of *TCL* grappled with this gaze.

The First Recorded Chinese Woman

The story of *TCL* is based upon a real woman, whose birth name remains unknown. She was born in the Guangzhou province, and then trafficked to the United States by two merchant brothers (the Carnes). The Carnes installed her as an attraction next to their purchasable imported goods, using her as marketing for their wares. After enticing potential porcelain and tea customers and then performing as a touring act throughout America for several years, she disappeared. As Davis writes, Afong did not leave behind a single autobiographical source. Nor do we know much about her translator. In her book, also titled “The Chinese Lady,” Davis mines adjacent materials such as newspapers and others’ letters to write richly of the historical milieu in which Afong lived and to posit the ways in which this context may have influenced her inner life.

With the possibilities of artistic license, Lloyd Suh vibrantly imagines the nuances of Afong’s internal landscape while also continuously noting the impossibility of recreating her figure onstage. In his own way, Suh, too, traces the possibilities of Afong’s life. Suh performs a historiographic form of redress, imagining the lives, both internal and external, of Afong and Atung, so that they are not reduced to mere objects by the audience. But before diving into Suh’s imaginings, first, we need to address what, of Afong, is actually known, and how she fits into the historical milieu.

Driven by their presence in trade routes, the first Chinese men landed in U.S. in 1785. American traders were sometimes supported by Chinese clerks or male servants in

Guangzhou, and occasionally traders would bring these assistants to the U.S.³⁰ In the half century interim, the United States had begun to trade with China, but the movement was primarily West to East as American merchants from the U.S. traveled to Guangzhou (Davis 2). “China-mania” began in the 18th century, as American thirsts for Chinese tea and East Indies textiles grew (“The Making of Asian America” 29). When the transatlantic slave trade is formally banned by the British in 1834 (the same year that Afong arrives in the U.S.), colonial use of indentured servitude and coolie labor, particularly in Cuba, increases. Then, in January 1848, gold nuggets are discovered at Sutter’s Mill in Northern California, enticing Americans and Chinese to the West.

The first wave of Chinese male immigration was spurred by dreams of Gold Mountain, and then, industrialization. At first, most immigrant men were miners; by 1860, 70% of all Chinese men in California were miners (“The Making of Asian America” 74). Few found gold. Then, many Chinese (men) worked jobs that were too dangerous, dirty, or degrading for white men, such as the building the Central Pacific Railroad (part of the Transpacific Railroad) (Davis 66). When this work dried up in 1869, these immigrant men become textile workers, launderers, restaurant owners, farmers, farmworkers, and other laborers. But before most of them landed in the United States, Afong arrived, introducing the American public to Chinese women.

In 1834, Afong Moy stepped foot on U.S. soil, approximately about 50 years after the first Chinese men. Afong stayed in the United States for seventeen years – or, perhaps, even longer. While Afong disappears into the annals of history after her final public appearance in

³⁰ There are also a few instances of Chinese students who studied in mission schools and then stayed in these foreign countries (Davis 62-3).

1851, her presence shaped American understandings of who lived in China, the perceived differences between Chinese and American culture, and the United States' international political aims (Davis 262). Additionally, the way in which Afong was presented – as a commodity selling other commodities – inextricably intertwined U.S. understandings of China with physical goods and highlighted growing middle class desires for the purchasable exotic.

Afong was othered and objectified from her first to her last recorded moments in the United States. She was originally listed as Auphmoy in the manifest records of *Washington*, the ship which illegally trafficked her to the United States (Davis 33). A newspaper termed her “Miss Julia Foochee-ching-chang-king” (Davis 128). Hence, we don’t actually know Afong’s name. She probably lived in Guangzhou Province, an area to which Americans were allowed access, and was likely the daughter of a local merchant or a middle-man to merchants (Davis 37). Technically, her transport as a Chinese woman on a foreign ship was illegal, but “in actuality relatives did, and could, effect this transaction”; in all likelihood, her father was paid for a several year contract for her, and she did not have any say in the matter (Davis 41). Afong’s feet were bound, which meant that her family either had aspirations for a socially mobile marriage or were financially comfortable, as most foot-bound women needed to be supported. It is worth noting that because Afong’s feet were bound, when she journeyed to America, she needed a knowledgeable Chinese woman to help her clean and rebind her feet and support her in everyday tasks; whoever this woman was, there is no mention of her name, her journeys abroad, or her reception in America (Davis 44).

As Afong’s travels took her far and wide, she was increasingly objectified, in both presentation and treatment. She was initially presented in the salon of the Obears home in

New York City (Davis 51). Here, an audience would pay to enter the salon and then encounter Afong, who was surrounded by goods (mostly everyday objects that visitors could purchase). Afong would demonstrate some of these objects' use and also promote goods for upcoming auctions. Atung, her Chinese translator, would simultaneously explain and contextualize her actions and the objects. The audience would then be "enlightened," and able to purchase proof of this newfound brush with international culture (Davis 51). In other words, Afong operated as product placement and Atung, an active marketer. In 1835, Afong met President Andrew Jackson. It would be 33 years before another Chinese person meets an American president and a full century before the first Chinese ambassador is installed in Washington, D.C. (Davis 67).

As Afong traveled across the Eastern seaboard, her presentation changed. In Philadelphia, she met visitors in a darkened auditorium that had been transformed with dioramas, lamps, and semi-transparent canvases, and presented objects from a "Chinese museum" (Davis 67). In 1835, eight physicians privately examined her feet. Given the shame-inducing, pornographic, and "unthinkable" nature of this "request" from Afong's perspective, is unlikely that she had much choice in this matter (Davis 138). Images of her feet began to be circulated. She also traveled to Baltimore, Charleston (here, she was forced to present her unwrapped feet to the public), Washington, D.C., Boston, and Albany.³¹ When the Carneses' business folds, Afong travels to Cuba, is subsumed into the management of

³¹ Regarding her feet's exposure in Charleston, Davis quotes one newspaper article which states, "the Lady has been compelled to sacrifice her sense of delicacy in consenting to the exposure" (164).

Henry Hannington, and presented in the fashionable theatre complex of Niblo's Garden.³²

Hannington's entertainment business collapses in the financial panic of 1837, and no one, not Hannington, the Carneses, or the Obears who traveled with Afong for years, steps in to help her. In 1838, Afong is placed in a Monmouth County poorhouse. She stays there for 8 years (Davis 230). In the late 1840s, Phineas Taylor (P.T.) Barnum begins to present Afong, this time as an anomaly (Davis 242). In all iterations of his iterations, whether Barnum pairs her with Tom Thumb or she shares a bill with Signor Canto, The Wonderful Man Monkey, and the 15 year old 430 pound Ohio Mammoth Girl, Afong is deemed freakish (Davis 254; 258). By May 1850, Barnum replaces Afong with Pwan-Ye-Koo, a new Chinese lady.³³ Afong is publicly recognized one final time in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1851, and then she disappears (Davis 262). Unfortunately, her disappearance portends the vanishing, willful or enforced, of Asian diasporic women in coming years.

In the ensuing century, Congress restricted the passage and rights of Asians by passing a panoply of anti-Asian legislative acts. Twenty-four years after we lose track of Afong, the United States passes the Page Act, which bars the immigration of women suspected of prostitution and contract laborers. While the Page Act ostensibly applied to any potential would-be immigrants, in effect, it predominantly barred Chinese immigration. In 1882, Senator John F. Miller introduces the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Congress passes it, and President Chester A. Arthur signs it into law. This act banned the entry of Chinese

³² In 1835, the market for Chinese goods (which the Carneses created) collapses, due to saturation, and a fire in the New York City business district breaks out, burning down the Carnes' warehouses (Davis 194; 224).

³³ Interestingly, some historians argue that Pwan-Ye-Koo was brought over from China, whereas others posit that she may have been mixed race Chinese/white, born and raised in New York (Davis 259).

laborers for the next ten years and curtailed the rights of Chinese laborers who had already immigrated. In 1892, Congress extends the Exclusion Act in the form of the Geary Act, which is made permanent in 1902. We wait until 1965 for comprehensive immigration reform. These acts were driven by prejudice, but they were also galvanized by the simultaneous desires for goods and materials and a theoretical lack of competition for labor. Starting back to the 1830s, Afong's presence demarcates not just the United States' public's first encounter with a Chinese woman, but also a shift in the way that American traders interacted with Chinese goods.

The Carnes cousins were not just merchants, but also entrepreneurs, as Francis and Nathaniel Carnes developed new methods of commodity trading, now legible as neoliberal trade relations. The cousins were the first American trade merchants to import "large quantities of Chinese mass-produced goods... to sell in America at a cheaper cost than Western-made goods" (Davis 22). The Carneses sent examples of goods they wanted to China, including Parisian perfumes, London sweetmeats, and more. Chinese factories would re-produce these goods, down the label, sell these European fancy goods to the Carneses, and then in turn, the Carneses would sell these goods to other retailers in the U.S. (who would sometimes sell these items to retailers in far-off locations). In short, the Carneses created a multi-national company. In conjunction with Afong, the cousins also brought in cheap Chinese goods to sell as exotic goods. These included fireworks, rice paintings, toys and puzzles of all kinds, shawls (which were in and of themselves actually Persia and East India's influence, not Chinese), fans, lacquer tea caddies, teacups and pots, snuffboxes, tea, feather dusters, baskets, and more (Davis 23; 71; 80; 82; 101; 103; 107; 113). Sometimes the Carneses purchased small quantities from peddlers, sometimes they ordered large quantities

from shopkeepers (Davis 86). Finally, through newspapers, pamphlets, tours, and of course, presenting Afong, the Carneses began one of the first advertising campaigns in the United States (Davis 24). While one could argue that the Carneses' international trade and marketing tactics foretold "the rise of the late twentieth-century US-China trade and the twenty-first century global marketplace," I argue that these strategies are emblematic of a neoliberal mindset, particularly as it pertains to the exploitation of Asian diasporic women (Davis 25). When we analyze *TCL*, we see that the consumption inherent to the neoliberal mindset and gaze have always existed for Asian diasporic women in the United States.

Ornamentalism and the Objectifying Gaze

In this section, I situate the neoliberal consumptive mindset and gaze by explicating the theoretical lenses of objecthood and ornamentalism, as these lenses clarify the stakes of viewing Asian diasporic women. Feminist scholars such as Laura Mulvey and Jill Dolan have grappled with the impact of different gazes. In 1975, Mulvey theorized the relationship between visual pleasure, narrative cinema, and, as she termed it, "the male gaze." Mulvey's essay argued that classical cinematic narrative structure creates a specifically male viewing position by aligning the spectator with the hero and fetishizing the (heterosexual) hero's female counterpart. In the late 1980s, Jill Dolan built on Mulvey's framework of spectatorship while sidestepping an analysis of male identity, centering instead on the feminist spectator by parsing various substrands of feminist performance. Dolan's work critically examines the relationship between "theater's representational apparatus" and its "ideological work," noting that dramaturgical structure ties into dramaturgical labor (or what

the work claims “to do”) (Dolan xiv). But how do these questions of spectatorship relate to racialized women, specifically Asian diasporic women?

The history of Asian, Asian American, or diasporic Asians in Western performance, a history of misrepresentation through stereotypes, fear-mongering representations of Communism, and Oriental exoticism, proves that even if Asian diasporic women “succeed” in booking jobs, their success is still constrained by the neoliberal gaze which follows them. Even within in the last few years, both Hollywood and large regional theatres have successfully produced and programmed yellow face films and productions.³⁴ Though these performed stereotypes can be read as a form of Orientalism, historically, performers have acquiesced to these stereotypes out of economic need, or the hopes that these roles will lead to more nuanced work (E. Lee 13). Unfortunately, Oriental stereotypes have swept actors’ hopes away all too often, as Anna May Wong, the iconic first Chinese American movie star, experienced in the early 1900s, and current Asian diasporic actors continue to.³⁵ Edward Said’s Orientalism offers one framework for better understanding the treatment of Asian diasporic performers.

Orientalism is a style and stance ingrained in Western discourse that justifies the re-ordering and subjugation of non-Western peoples through imperialistic projects. It circulates

³⁴ See, for example, Scarlett Johansson’s in the 2017 *Ghost in the Shell*; Tilda Swinton in 2016 *Doctor Strange* (and the ensuing media frenzy over Swinton’s release of emails between her and Margaret Cho); and the New York City Skirball’s 2015 programming of a production of *The Mikado*, and the backlash against this, led by playwright Leah Nanako Winkler.

³⁵ Wong became extremely frustrated when, even after spending years working in Hollywood, she continued to be cast in the role of “exotic seductress.” She began to seek better roles in Europe in the late 1920s and worked in both Hollywood and Europe in the 1930s. When Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer cast a white actress as the lead Chinese character O-Lan (over her), Wong chose to spend the next year exploring her family’s heritage and studying Chinese culture.

through French, British and American academic journals, newspapers, novels, and popular culture, resulting in a culturally hegemonic gaze which dominates Eastern cultures, justifying “Occidental” authority over them. Afong is certainly subjected to an Orientalizing gaze, but her historic experience exceeds an Orientalist framing; Said’s Orientalism is derived from “a particular closeness” of relationship between France, Britain, and the Orient, “which really meant only India and the Bible lands” until the early nineteenth century (Said 3). American’s involvement in Orientalism, according to the texts Said examines, is continued predominantly in the 20th century as America begins to dominate the Orient post World War II. While Moy could be viewed as a harbinger of Orientalism, Said is predominantly concerned with texts that imagine a romanticized vision of the Orient, rather than examining the material existence of diasporic people within Western countries. Other theorists, such as Hortense Spiller, Uri McMillan, Anne Anlin Cheng, and Grace Hong, take up questions of lived experience, as well as the power flows which shape these experiences.

Theorizing objecthood and Ornamentalism contextualizes the stakes in which Afong is viewed, as well as the possibilities and perils of these two states. In her work on Black women, Hortense Spillers argues that being turned into an object is “the ultimate debasement, a denial of subjectivity” (McMillan 8-9). In contrast, Uri McMillan reasons that performing objecthood can become a strategy for asserting one’s (black, female) subjecthood as an art object. In other words, McMillan refuses a dichotomy between agency and thingliness and instead, proposes that “forms of subjectivity and agency are always present, however miniscule they may be” (McMillan 9). These forms, he asserts, allow Black women to circumvent prescribed limitations upon their bodies and identities. McMillan’s subjects wield their avatars to mitigate danger and navigate faux identities in the public sphere.

Similarly, Afong forces us to consider the ways in which the performance of objecthood can and cannot be negotiated by an embodied subject. She first actively participates, and then denies, the faux identity that she has crafted – and that has been crafted for her.

To attempt this subversion, Afong contends with the specific identity placed upon Asian diasporic women: their decorative nature. As Anne Anlin Cheng notes, diasporic Asian women emerge “*as and through* ornament,” or as and through aesthetic abstraction (Ornamentalism 14).³⁶ Cheng develops Ornamentalism in response to two primary conceptual frameworks for conceptualizing racial embodiment, Frantz Fanon’s “epidermal racial schema” and Spiller’s “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (Ornamentalism 4). These two frameworks respectively conceptualize black skin outside of a white gaze and black flesh itself (particularly black female flesh) as a marker for racial violence. But while Fanon and Spiller analyze the materiality of black bodies and flesh, Cheng argues that their frameworks are less applicable to (female) Asian bodies; Asiatic femininity is simultaneously the promise and the supplanting of yellow skin and flesh, not its denial. Dehumanized differently, the invalidation of Asiatic feminine bodies often occurs by aligning bodies with decorative absence.³⁷ Just as Said’s Orientalism means “several things, all interdependent,” Ornamentalism encompasses a multiplicity (Said 2). Ornamentalism operates as an epistemology, “a process whereby personhood is conceived and suggested” and “a very

³⁶ In 2018, Cheng published an article titled “Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman.” In 2019, Cheng published a book titled “Ornamentalism.” Thus, I refer to the article as “A Feminist Theory” in future citations so as to avoid confusion.

³⁷ This is not in direct opposition to black bodies/flesh, but does work differently; as Spiller and Fanon argue, the materiality of black flesh/bodies is enlisted and exploited, often in service to the state apparatus.

elegant... alchemy between the borrowing properties of thingness and personhood” (“A Feminist Theory” 446; 429).

I bring the idea of Ornamentalism to theater and performance, as embodied representation illuminates the ways in which Ornamentalism operates and is imposed. If the signifier denoted to Asiatic female bodies insists on both synthesis and artificiality, then how can performance complicate our understanding of the tenuous line between personhood and objecthood (“A Feminist Theory”)? “Commodification and fetishization, the dominant critical paradigms we have for understanding representations of racialized femininity, simply do not ask the harder question of what *being* is at the interface of ontology and objectness” (“A Feminist Theory” 432).³⁸ Performances forces the audience to contend with the ways in which this *being* (Cheng’s italics), Chinese femininity, forms the common boundary between objecthood and subjecthood.³⁹ The danger with considering Ornamentalism through performance is that this merging easily leads us towards a desire to find resistance. While Ornamentalism does not attempt to retrieve human agency, as its subject is not a subject but an aesthetic supplement, a “person-thing,” it does encourage us to consider what action can look like for those who emerge out of unmaking (Cheng 14; 16). How does the subjugated find herself through a denial of subjecthood and an alignment with aesthetic form? Because performance is durational and we watch Afong for over an hour, *TCL* forces us to contend with the process of Ornamentalism. As she develops these ideas, Cheng provides multiple references for “thingliness,” including Afong Moy. But while Afong holds the dubious honor

³⁸ Her italics.

³⁹ While Cheng begins by talking about Asiatic femininity, she begins to alternately utilize “Chinese” femininity, in large part because her article reads the exhibit, *China: Through Looking Glass*.

of being the initial reference in Cheng's panoply of Ornamental women, as the first yellow woman in the United States, unfortunately, she is not the last, as the value of Asian diasporic women continues to be debated.

Grace Hong argues that in the 20th century, certain populations become valued for their valuelessness: "existentially surplus." Neoliberalism, she asserts, operates by creating markets for intangible things (information technology or bitcoin), and it thrives on consumption of these goods (Hong 91-92). In other words, some populations are useful to capital not for what they can do (i.e. as potential sources of labor), but for their intrinsic disposability. While Hong argues that this shift occurs in response to mid-20th century liberation movements, I argue – and assert that *TCL* shows – certain populations have always been valued for their ability to be consumed and then discarded. This set of values, Afong shows us, have always been applied to Asian diasporic women.

Theorizing the Neoliberal Gaze through Dramaturgy

The most famous lithograph remaining of Afong Moy embodies her "objecthood," forcing viewers to consider ingesting her ornamentality. The artist places Afong at the approximate center of the photograph and the chair; a chair and painted vase in the foreground of the lithograph create a rough triangle, establishing her as a possible focal point. Yet Afong seems oddly small, even doll-like. She is approximately the same height as both the chair and the vase – a rather dramatic artistic choice, even when accounting for perspective. Additionally, the spectator's eye is easily drawn to either the foregrounded chair or vase over Afong, as Afong is drawn rather darkly and blankly, contrasting the intricately woven pattern of the chair, the flora bursting forth from any vase confines, and even the surrounding rugs and drapery.

While Afong is technically etched at the center(ish) of the lithograph, she is also one prop among many, posed next to a festooned lace table, adjacent to an intricately carved bench, chair, vase, bureau, and French-hung curtains. Visually, the artist places the same emphasis upon, or equates the value between, Afong's presence and the surrounding objects. Her eyes look just to the right side of us, inviting the spectator to take in their fill of her form without fear of confrontation or a simultaneous examination. Is her gaze vacuous or is omniscient? Is she looking away out of a polite disregard, personal desire to keep some interior secret to herself, artist direction, or was it a slip of the hand? These questions continue to haunt those who contemplate this lithograph; *TCL* animates one response.

TCL brings together these questions of spectatorship, thingliness, personhood, as well as others of interiority, social responsibility, and global economic processes. While *TCL* demands close attention to the intertwining nature of content, form, and history, Suh also demands that we see the affective result of this intertwining. The play argues that the historic neoliberal project uses Orientalism as a tool for further capital accumulation and minoritarian exploitation, but in this case, the Orientalist approach is not Imperialistic: the very premise of the play emerges from neoliberal policies. Afong's presence in the United States does not rise out of an American desire to colonize or subjugate the Chinese. Rather, her presence comes from the Carne brothers' desire to accumulate capital through sold goods. Afong is a vector, an attraction intended to entice customers into purchasing imported goods. As Afong sells these goods, she also sells herself, which is made even more stark when the Carne brothers drop her and her identity becomes the exhibit. As we watch Afong is selling herself, we are forced to consider if we able to escape the trap of consuming her.

The neoliberal gaze is an affective template, a repertoire of attitudes and locations that has become naturalized and, as such, seems to work by itself.⁴⁰ *TCL* calls attention to the ways in which this template operates, but the play does not merely de-familiarize certain assumptions. Instead, *TCL* also re-enacts the process of being turned into an Ornamental object, forcing different audiences to contend with their roles in this process.

So what, then, does it mean to have “a neoliberal gaze?” If we heed the active theoretical and conceptual labor of the spectator, as Jacques Rancière encourages, while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of moving outside neoliberalism, how do we then account for spectator complicity in enacting a neoliberal gaze? In this section, I examine the relationship between audience and Afong, arguing that Suh intervenes in the assumed spectator-subject relationship by illuminating the ways in which the neoliberal gaze works. I highlight two specific moments in the play: the first scene and the end of scene three, after the re-enactment President Andrew Jackson finishes. The first scene, I assert, activates the audience as complicit in the neoliberal gaze. Then, this latter moment is where both Afong and the audience become aware of said complicity. In other words, *TCL* sets up a structural mechanism that does the work of calling our attention to the neoliberal gaze, defining it, charging us with embodying it, and then undoing it.

To do this work, I argue that *TCL* casts the audience as the fourth character of this play, in addition to the Afong, Atung, and The Room. While *TCL* does not go so far as to invite the audience to choose the narrative arc of the performance, talk back, or explore the space, the audience’s inclusion moves past a Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, or a technique of

⁴⁰ My thanks to Dr. Leo Cabranes-Grant for his insightful phrasing.

estrangement designed to provoke the audience into critical reflection.⁴¹ Here, the play situates the audience in such a way that we are rendered complicit in perpetuating this gaze, and then forced to recognize our role.

From the very first moment of the play, when Afong directly welcomes us into her exhibit, she casts us as her historical audience. At the top of the play, this casting seems like a light-hearted invitation; we bask in the winks she offers, we're invited to unpack the history she unspools for our benefit, and we laugh along as she playfully antagonizes Atung. We're her curious viewers, her educated and intrigued observers, her diplomatic contacts, and her potential friends. When Atung gets serious for a moment about dynamics of cultural exchange and representation, we get to laugh as she ribs him by slurping her tea loudly.⁴² As 17-year-old Afong waxes poetic about a crack in the Liberty Bell, using the bell's imperfection as an excuse to craft a metaphor about the fragility of liberty, we smile at her youthful romanticism.

Yet even as the play casts us as her historical audience, it also blurs the boundaries between the audience who would have watched her show in the past and the contemporary audience who are in on the conceit of watching her in a theater show. We first see this in the set-up of her introduction: "Hello. My name is Afong Moy. It is the year 1834. I am fourteen years old, and newly arrived in America." Here, we are aware of the juxtaposed time periods; if we were exclusively her historical audience, we wouldn't need to hear that she's newly

⁴¹ I list these tactics out because they are commonly used by other "socially turned" performance pieces.

⁴² Following the comedic writing's rule of three, Suh crafts this beat so that Afong's slurping is the punchline to the joke. Presenting contemporary teenager-caretaker dynamics, after Atung deflects her questions regarding his thoughts on cultural exchange by telling her to drink her tea, in quick succession, she asks, "Would you like some?" explains how delicious it is, and then inquires, "Are you sure?" before finally slurping it down.

arrived, as the Carnes advertised her presence. Then, couched within a flippant dismissal of Atung, she explicitly states,

We will not be needing Atung's translation services for the time being, for I am not speaking. It would of course seem that I am speaking, as my mouth is moving and my thoughts are becoming articulated through sound, but this is in fact not what is happening. What is happening is a performance. For my entire life is a performance. These words that you hear are not my own. These clothes that I wear are not my own. This body that I occupy is not my own. This Room in which I am seated is intended to be representative of China, just as I am intended to be representative of The Chinese Lady: the first woman from the Orient ever to set foot in America, and yet this Room is unlike any room in China, and I am unlike any lady to ever live.

And yet here we are. You and I (Suh 2).

Immediately, we are aware of the construction of history; we know that the true picture of the past has already flit by (Benjamin 255). This language also conflates her identity with her *mise en scène*, including her clothes and the surrounding Room. This is the first indication of the neoliberal gaze; we understand that Afong's identity is constructed *through* her ornamentation and the surrounding objects, that we best comprehend the abstract Asian diasporic woman through the manifestation of material objects (which include her). While the clothes that she wears were not worn by the "real" Afong, and "this Room" is, in fact, a fabricated fantasy of Chinese rooms designed to sell the maximum amount of Carnes cousin goods, this is still the frame through which we contemplate her. As the scene continues, she highlights certain features that she possesses, "as they may seem exotic and foreign and unusual" to the audience (Suh 2). She explains the audience reaction to her when she shares:

I watch the customers enter the exhibition hall. I do not move. Some customers stand quietly and expectantly, while some come directly towards the Room and examine its contents. They look at the furniture. The vases. The silks and the paintings. They talk to each other. Oh look at that. I've never seen such a thing. It reminds me of. I wonder if. What do you think it feels like? And they look at me. They look at my eyes. They look at my hands. At my clothes. At my hair. At my face.

They say things to each other. Do you think she... I wonder if she... And my goodness look at her feet (Suh 2).

Here, Afong straddles the “person-thing divide” (Ornamentalism 14). She bears the privilege of aesthetics and the violence of aesthetic limitations. Linguistically, with their short exclamations and vague curiosity, the audience mirrors their responses to her and the surrounding Chinoiserie. They speak *about*, never *to*. Moreover, while having the customers respond to the objects first builds dramaturgical suspense (the objets d’art introduce her), an alternative understanding of this moment sees this order of object first, then Afong, as demarcating the objects as more important than Afong (because we usually respond to the most impactful thing first).

Finally, and importantly, Afong introduces those who come to The Room as “customers,” rather than viewers or audience, which draws attention to the neoliberal gaze. The main reason for attendance is to purchase and consume, whether through eyes, their mouths, or their minds. When Afong continues, she explains her feet directly to us, but this direct address also means that she does not explain her feet to the same customers who have just been appraising her. Again, she is caught between thing and person; she has the agency to explain to us now, in the liminal space which we occupy, but not necessarily to tell them, then. As the scene resumes, Afong shows off her bound feet by demonstrating her walk, eats shrimp and Chinese vegetables with chopsticks, and prepares and pours tea. Her embodiment continues to be determined by the surrounding, purchasable Chinoiserie.

In this first scene, we see how the neoliberal gaze objectifies its subjects, stripping them of narrative complexity or nuanced humanity. Whereas the male gaze gauges the success of the female heroine by measuring her distance from the traditionally fetishized Western notions of beauty, the neoliberal gaze gauges the success of the object of study by measuring her distance from the spectator’s consumption. As detailed above, Afong’s

customers desire the experience of viewing the exotic without grappling with the larger socio-political implications of her specific unknown – they don't directly interact with her through waves or smiles or tentative "Hellos." The neoliberal gaze focuses on the fetishization of figures as simplistic objects by obscuring or dismissing the objects' labor; the work of Afong's presentation, explanation, and attempts to communicate are ignored in favor of discussing the shock of her abnormality.

The neoliberal gaze dominates through the desire to devour and the ability to distance the act of consumption from labor that might animate the object of consumption. Satisfaction is derived through the act of consumption itself, rather than aligning this consumption with an exterior standard of values. While the customers who come to The Room are interested in things that are "exotic, and foreign, and unusual," what exactly that means is never defined. As Said theorizes, Orientalism was created by Western world to define themselves against. The customers may not know exactly what is exotic and foreign and unusual, but they know that it is not them, and in this Othering, they can.

Even though it undermines the assumption of a universal standard of aesthetics, the neoliberal gaze's assumption of individual opportunities for participation and consumption prove less than liberatory. Jen Harvie, for example, argues that opportunities for individual participation in socially engaged performance can encourage further engagement while simultaneously nourishing neoliberal inequality and governmentality (12). Instead of dehumanizing its subjects through comparison to a socially encoded value system (Afong is not compared to other women), the neoliberal gaze dehumanizes through consumption (Afong is easily available, for use and thus, dismissal – and eventual discard).

In other words, the neoliberal gaze assesses bodies-as-objects under the tenet of Hong's "existentially surplus," or the theorization that some populations are useful to capital not for what they can do (i.e. as potential sources of labor), but for their "intrinsic lack of value" (92). This dearth of value is initially marked by the ways in which customers align Afong with the surrounding Chinoiserie, but it is made explicit in scene three, when she and Atung recreate her recent exchange with (then-sitting) President Andrew Jackson.

At the beginning of this recreation, Afong is seventeen years old, a romantic whisked away by the thrill of traveling to Baltimore: "It was as lovely as it sounds" (Suh 15). She is avowedly much more interested in a "better and more beautiful" story than the truth and is thrilled to share her experience with the audience, and that Atung steps into The Room (for the first time) and takes the stage with her (Suh 15). Surprisingly, Atung is remarkably comfortable as both himself and Jackson, playing both the role of the interpreter and the role of the president "with conviction" (Suh 20).

The game is initially filled with playful winks for the audience. Atung, for example, translates Afong's offering, "I feel my fame has provided me a tremendous opportunity to share more about who we are; not simply on the surface levels of clothing and adornments, but a deeper, more lasting intimacy" to "I am famous. I want you to know who I am" (Suh 21). Even if the *bonhomie* runs a bit thin at times, Afong, Atung as translator, and Jackson via Atung all seem to be building camaraderie. While the audience may pick up on Jackson's Orientalist perspective, revealed through his shallow compliments and tokenizing gaze, Afong is eager to build diplomatic ties, and she accepts small twinges of discomfort as cultural differences.

The scene turns when Jackson baldly declares, “I would like to touch your feet” (Suh 22). Atung attempts to dissuade him, explaining that “it is not so typical for such a thing,” but Jackson willfully ignores Atung’s discomfort, explaining that he is “not a typical person” (Suh 22). Afong acquiesces. Jackson delights in holding her “disgusting and mesmerizing” foot, and shares that he’s “always adored carnivals and freakshows” (Suh 23). The cultural mistranslations which initially seemed playful or at awkward, reveal themselves to harbingers of a deeper misunderstanding – one where humanity isn’t a given, objecthood is imposed, and ownership over these exotic objects is assumed. Afong recognizes that that fetishized, accommodating yellow woman is not only expected, but also demanded. While she can’t immediately process the violation of Jackson’s treatment, she senses that Jackson sees her first and foremost through her bound feet – a kind of embodied adornment.

We see Afong struggle to integrate this affective awareness of her Ornamental nature. She processes her disgust and shame after meeting Andrew Jackson, peppering Atung with increasingly desperate questions: “What do they see when they see me?... What if we simply do not belong here? ... What things *can* I control?” Atung attempts to calm her: “You must not worry yourself with things you cannot control... It is time to rest,” to which Afong bursts out “NO.” Atung rebuts her quietly and intensely, “Afong Moy... Please. They are watching” (Suh 28).

This moment can be interpreted as an admonition for Afong to “save face,” a Chinese social value that intertwines communal expectations, personal morality and shame, group favor, and larger social standing.⁴³ Hsien Hu, the first Western anthropological academic to

⁴³ The concept of “saving face” applies in a variety of Asian cultures; see work such as Baig’s “Intergenerational Narratives on Face,” Haugh’s “Analysing ‘face-in-interaction’ in

document the intricacies of “saving face” in 1944, demarcates two facets of saving face: *mien-tzŭ* and *lien*.⁴⁴ *Mien-tzŭ* is social prestige that comes from personal success and clever maneuvering. *Lien*, however, is societal belief in the integrity of one’s morality. The loss of *lien*, Hu writes, makes it impossible for one to function properly within the surrounding community. *Lien* serves as both “a social sanction for enforcing moral standards and an internalized sanction ” (Hu 45). While one interpretation of this moment reads Afong’s response may be a culturally specific attempt to save face, I argue that this beat is significant because it can also be interpreted as the moment Afong becomes aware of the neoliberal gaze.

Afong senses that the audience’s neoliberal gaze is not the friend or diplomatic offering she has long thought it to be, but that it may be, in fact, patronizing, objectifying, dismissing, and consuming her. When Atung tells her that the “they” are watching, she falls silent. The stage directions offer, “Perhaps he [Atung] takes hold of her head, by the chin, as if to show her the eyes of the audience.” While Suh does not direct this moment, his stage directions indicate the importance of Afong newly taking in the stakes of being watched. Suh then declares, “And with that, she is silent. Perhaps she forces a smile” (Suh 28). This potential smile is a way to mask her recognition and horror both an act of violence and survival. Part of her knows, perhaps for the first time, that her survival is dependent upon not just saving face, but maintaining a specific face: that of the accommodating, “disgusting,” and “mesmerizing” Oriental woman (as Jackson describes her) (Suh 23). Heretofore, she has

Japanese,” Choi’s “The internal structure of the Korean social face (*chemyon*)” for respective South Asian Indian American, Japanese, and Korean perspectives (2014; 2009; 2000).

⁴⁴ I use Hu’s original spelling here, though contemporary Pinyin and traditional characters would write this as “*miànzi*” or 面子.

seen Atung as disciplinarian and the audience as confidant. Now, Afong's cognizance shifts as she sees that Atung has, in fact, been protecting her from the knowledge of an underlying internment.

This moment also marks a clear turning point for the audience, as here, the play prompts its viewers to recognize their own perpetuation of the neoliberal gaze. Following Afong's realization of the audience watching her, our understanding of the impact of our spectatorship abruptly snaps into focus. Afong takes us in, and then actively hides her vulnerability from us; we are forced to see ourselves through her eyes. It is easy to mark Jackson's treatment of Afong as condescending, entitled, and violating. But as we watch Afong struggle to integrate this newfound awareness into her worldview, we are hailed into considering our own role, as well.

Like Jackson, we have assessed Afong on her entertainment value, rather than recognize the diplomatic attempts she has tried so hard to engage. How many times have we laughed at the mistranslations in the previous game? Did we think it was humorous when her line, "And I admire the American people for their boundless curiosity and fierce individuality," was changed into "American people also good I think" (Suh 21)? Perhaps we laughed out loud when Afong's quote, "I feel my fame has provided me a tremendous opportunity to share more about who we are; not simply on the surface levels of clothing and adornments, but a deeper, more lasting intimacy," was translated as "I am famous. I want you to know who I am" (Suh 21). These laughs may have been friendly, but they were also likely tinged with a patronizing edge. Instead of recognizing each previous as an attempt at diplomacy, we have dismissed the very real work of listening, translating, and communicating.

This moment is not quite *verfremdungseffekt*; we've been aware of the narrative conceit from the play's beginning and are reminded of it via the lead actresses'/Afong's intermittent interruptions. Nonetheless, Afong's confrontation of Atung and herself heightens the stakes of the play. While our relationship with Afong has felt playful, friendly, or even collaborative, all of a sudden, we realize that as audience members, we have inescapably imposed a neoliberal gaze. Ineluctably, at some point we have earlier aligned her "on the surface levels of clothing and adornments," considering her value as a person-thing, or, an object.

The gaze here is neoliberal because the stakes of this moment are not about whether or not the audience continues to hold Afong in high social standing or whether her internalized moral standards remain intact. The stakes, here, are about the danger of Afong openly questioning her place as an Ornament. She recognizes the standards by which we value her when she says, "Times I feel I am a swan or a peacock, with adornments to be admired," and Atung immediately shuts her down (Suh 28). Atung knows her role is to be admired, tokenized, Ornamentized – not to speak back, take action, or actively reproach us. Afong's role has been to provide amusement, entertainment, aesthetic value, and encourage commerce; objects cannot hold agency. Afong may not immediately understand that her burgeoning awareness of the neoliberal gaze will lead her to reinterpret her past, present, and future, but she feels the affective change.

Temporally, the neoliberal gaze is established at the beginning of the play through Suh's audience casting, cultivated through production design, and recognized in the third scene by Afong. However, it exists not just in the interaction with Jackson, but throughout the entirety of the play. As the play continues, Suh damagingly connects our yearning to

consume the exotic laborer as object with global geopolitical consequences, highlighting a neoliberal drive that affects not just Afong, but also Atung. In his encounter with the two, President Jackson reveals that as much as he'd like to visit China one day, he's unlikely to do so. "The British are on the verge of war with China... No, it's not our war but we do have interests. I have no love of the British obviously, but there's money in opium, money in tea. The trade routes are lucrative and so it behooves us, you understand" (Suh 23). When Atung asks him to repeat himself, more slowly, Jackson laughs and patronizes, "It's over your heads, of course."⁴⁵ We see that while Afong may feel Jackson's condescension, she doesn't trace the larger picture. Now, just as we recognize our own complicity in perpetuating Afong's exploitation, we also see Atung through Jackson's eyes; a confused, acquiescing man.⁴⁶ The technical and interpersonal skills of Atung's labor in listening, understanding, translating, and communicating, are also dismissed.

This is perpetuated, in part, by Atung's newfound accent, who, until Jackson's arrival, has never spoken with a noticeable dialect.⁴⁷ In previous scenes, Atung has spoken in a neutral accent (or a mid-Atlantic dialect which is widely considered to be "neutral" in coastal United States cities). But by playing both Andrew Jackson's Carolina "good ol' boys" accent and a native-born Chinese accent, Atung verbally distinguishes the Outsider from the American.

⁴⁵ Every night I sat in the audience, at this moment, I saw Asian audience members freeze and take tight inhales. Even though we (by which I mean Asian audience members here) understand intellectually that the same actor is playing both Atung and Jackson (and of course, that this entire moment is an act of imagination), the experience of seeing someone smirk and patronize a struggling Asian elder still hits somewhere raw.

⁴⁶ Eric Hayot's work on the Chinese male body as able to stoically withstand extensive pain and thus, become the ideal, subservient laborer proves particularly illuminating here.

⁴⁷ Note that this was a directorial and actor-driven choice; Suh's text doesn't give direction regarding accent, but as this

After Jackson leaves and Atung goes to fetch Afong's food, Afong connects the dots, articulating once again, the relationship between Jackson's treatment of her and his neoliberal desires. She begins by noting Britain's colonization of India, which leads to Britain's weaponization of opium and the Opium Wars. As an omniscient force, she notes, "The reason Britain *wanted* to control China was, of course, trade routes. And the most important reason to control trade routes, of course, is the price of tea" (Suh 26). Here, Afong does the historiographical work of ensuring that we recognize the politics that led to historical events; here, she highlights the fact that the British's consumptive desires drove their geopolitical aggression. This moment feels particularly poignant, as Afong has served us tea several times now. She never does again.

Afong's refusal to serve tea is engendered by her understanding that we have viewed her as consumable entertainment. By refusing to serve tea, she refuses the possibility that we will further diminish the labor of diplomacy, hospitality, and connection. By inhabiting a neoliberal gaze, we have not just minimized Afong's work but we have also minimized her value, identity, potential contributions, and existence. Most heartbreakingly, Afong begins to internalize this diminishment. Immediately following her explanation of British neoliberalism in China, she shares,

All I know is that you are looking at me, that I am presenting this image, that I have so much hope and so little reality, that the China of my mind is more and more distant every day, that the hope I hope is more and more hopeless, and with each passing hour I am less and less Chinese (Suh 26).

Though Suh doesn't paint Afong purely as a victim of the neoliberal gaze, this gaze still continues to affect Afong, seen through her accumulating loss of self. Afong may no longer be vivacious but her plan to sneak out, search for gold, and find Chinese people in America attends to both her particularity and agency as a subject. And yet, we see Afong engage

coping mechanisms that involve other commodities which have been traded across, including drinking and smoking (this reference to tobacco might also encourage us to think of the mass quantities of opium which were traded and weaponized).⁴⁸ Simultaneously, Afong goads the audience, confronting them with historical European-American acts of colonization against Americans in the United States, the treatment of immigrating Chinese “eager to work for lower wages than their white American counterparts,” and the absurdity of demonstrating chopsticks without food by grasping at the air (Suh 32). These acts of rebellion stifle her quiet anguish over the fact that she is “starting to lose [her] understanding of Cantonese” (Suh 31).⁴⁹ Of course, this isolation increases as her value decreases. In scene four, Afong reveals that she is no longer special enough to warrant an individual attraction. She is now literally worth less.

In the following scene, Afong is replaced by another 14-year-old with even smaller feet, musical skills, and acrobatic abilities. Afong has become both materially and existentially surplus. In the wake of Atung’s abandonment, as she is pushed out of the Room for the first time and struggles to find her way forward, she acknowledges how much she’s lost. Afong hasn’t heard from her family in over thirty years, she can’t remember her siblings’ faces, and she can’t even remember her mother. This familial amnesia leads to her own unmooring. Afong offers,

And thus you battle
To understand the proper shape of yourself

And perhaps this is always the way.

⁴⁸ In our production, we heightened the surprise of Afong’s drinking by placing her whiskey bottle inside the teapot; when it appears as if Afong is about to serve tea, she instead opens the teapot to reveal alcohol hidden inside and pours herself a stiff drink.

⁴⁹ These acts of rebellion also serve, in theory, to incite a reaction from Atung. But Atung has retreated into himself and drifts farther and farther away from Afong.

You grow bigger
And yet you grow smaller (Suh 38).

While we audience members know that we're not responsible for Afong's replacement, we can't help but still feel somewhat reprehensible. As the Room is offstage, Afong is literally smaller, shorter than she's ever been now that she no longer stands on The Room's platform. She wanders alone, without the comfort of Afong. Her walk, once a beautiful adornment, is clumsy and tripping. Without her surrounding objects, we are left to ask, what is the value of a person assessed as an object without a frame of reference? Under the neoliberal gaze, why should we care about her, when we have already consumed everything of value?

The Neoliberal Gaze in Production

In the previous section, I detailed the theory behind the neoliberal gaze. In this section, I briefly grapple with the experience of crafting it. What does it mean to build this kind of gaze in production, and is it possible to escape it? My experience directing the West Coast premiere of *TCL* in 2019 illuminated the complications of embodying and crafting the neoliberal gaze. When we opened, our production was simply another 99 seat theatre piece trying to gain attention and traction; unbeknownst to me, the play would go on to become wildly popular in ensuing years. The stakes of this production were personally and materially clear; I was working to establish a reputation in Los Angeles, and the producers, actors, and designers knew first-hand the dearth of artistic opportunities for Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) work.⁵⁰ This was also Artist At Play's (AAP) first co-production with a producing theater, Greenway Court, which meant that their audience would shift from

⁵⁰ I switch to this acronym as it is the one currently most commonly used by practitioners and theatres.

primarily Asian American viewers, to viewers of varying racial backgrounds. This context meant that while I was aware of the neoliberal gaze, I was not aware of its complications. When we were in the midst of rehearsals, we didn't have time to theorize, only time to create. But as we rehearsed and the actors actually began performing it, it became clear that the play's critique, exposure, and undermining of the neoliberal gaze, was also undermined at times.

As we built the show, I saw that the first scene could not reveal the neoliberal gaze due to the dramatic requirements of a production and a (contemporary) audience's inability to determine the specific dynamics of Afong's agency. When I say "dramatic requirements," I mean that live theatre sometimes requires actors to play against the text so that their performance has room for emotional change. For example, at the end of scene one, Afong tells the story of tea to introduce the idea that "history is an accident." She ends this story with a philosophical proclamation that,

It is human nature to be curious... This is what brings me here. We want to see. It is the same impulse that brought you here, to this room, to me. You want to look at me. You want to understand more about the world. You want to understand more. More. More (Suh 5).

Here, the dramatic build of "more. more. more" verbalizes the greed behind the neoliberal gaze. Linguistically, this syntax builds a moment of sinister tension, as we imagine grubby hands avariciously grasping, veiled as "understanding." But it would be counterproductive for the actress playing Afong to reveal this moment as the naked greed that it becomes; this acting choice would immediately clarify her audience and reveal her eventual discovery of the neoliberal gaze. Instead, the audience must become complicit in the neoliberal gaze before they can be anything else.

The more slippery and unexpected the production makes the audience's complicity, the more complicated their realization of this involvement becomes. "It is easy," Cheng reminds us, "to identify the wrongness of treating someone like a thing for one's own invidious gains, but it is much harder to understand or to judge when one treats oneself like a thing" (Ornamentalism 19). As we rehearsed, it became clear that in addition to treating herself like a thing, Amy actually needed to take pleasure in this self-abnegation.

If Afong not only dismisses the audience's objectification but actually plays with it, or delights in it, *TCL*'s critique of the neoliberal gaze becomes even more layered; the audience is then forced to contend with whether Afong's pleasure and play are forms of agency for someone who emerges out of unmaking or indicative of cultural ignorance, and how their participation has engendered these acts (Ornamentalism 16). Thus, Amy and I mined every opportunity for Afong to tease, over-dramatize, and empathize with the audience. Much of these acting choices came naturally, especially at the beginning of the play, and were indicated by Afong's age. For example, when Afong says, "You want to understand more about the world. You want to understand more. More. More," she is fourteen years old (Suh 5). Thus, I asked her to play this line as would an overly dramatic teenager, delighting in excess. This allowed Amy to ground Afong as a young teen, offer a moment of child-like connection with the audience, avoid the possibility that this line be read as pedantic, and drop in a hint (but only a hint) of foreshadowing. But while these choices made the production stronger, they also created issues.

Two complications emerged: one, that some audience members never recognized their complicity, seen through laughter at inappropriate moments, and two, the toll of this process on Amy. Laughter, and its many gradations, are indicative of an audience negotiating

(and questioning) their intellectual and emotional responses to work. Critic (and playwright) Eliza Bent demarcates the audience laughter in response to Young Jean Lee's work as such: "The laughs one hears... can sound explosive, then shocked, then apologetic and perhaps timid—as if the audience is wondering whether they should be laughing at all" (Bent). Bent's analysis is useful because of its precision and the categories of laughter she defines. But Bent's surety in defining these kinds of laughter is perhaps less exemplary of most audience experiences. In contrast, academic (and playwright) Dorinne Kondo's details her confusion and conflict when watching *Clybourne Park*:

As the play unfolds, the largely white audience responds enthusiastically, sometimes laughing uproariously, while my colleague and I are increasingly appalled, both at what is happening onstage and by our fellow spectators. As the evening proceeds, I feel increasingly marginalized, an "affect alien" (Ahmed 2010) who cannot join in the laughter. Yet the affective chasm is more than simple alienation. This is crazy-making. Am I/are we, the only ones who see? Why is the audience laughing? Are they sharing the laughter of discomfort? Recognition? Their laughter feels like Fellini's *8 1/2*, the screen crammed with faces that taunt: laughing *at*, not *with* (18).

Here, Kondo highlights her affective ostracization, as well as her uncertainty. Perhaps Kondo's positionality as a minoritized Asian diasporic woman, in contrast to Bent's white subjecthood, encourages her to constantly assess the shifting relativity of spectatorial power dynamics.

While I did not watch all of our production's performances (which is common practice for freelance directors), in the several performances which I did watch, I, too, had moments of surprise at where the audience laughed. This laughter did not consistently occur at the same temporal locations, but laughter did consistently occur after the point in the production where I assumed most of it would end (the reveal of Jackson's objectification of Afong). Twice, audience members laughed at the end of the play, after Afong has detailed two centuries of anti-Asian legal acts, castrations, and massacres, when she explains why

she's shared her experience with us and says, "But mostly I share it [my past] because I don't want you to forget me" (Suh 43). Where these moments of discomfort, shock, timidity, apology, or some combination therein? Was the audience laughing in self-recrimination as they recognized the ways in which they had been previously invited, by both the text and Amy's performance, to objectify, ornamentalize, dismiss, and consume Afong? Had we chosen to play Afong as too child-like, too rambunctious, too innocent, or too open? Or was this laughter a kind of affective response from Asian diasporic women, as they recognized themselves onstage? In contrast to Kondo, I did not feel like an affective alien, perhaps in part because our audience was more racially diverse than the typical Mark Taper forum. Nonetheless, this laughter did throw me at times, as it clarified the ouroboros of representation, or the impossibility of moving "beyond."

The trap of representation is reproduction – which we were unable to escape. If we create opportunities for Asian diasporic performers, we often recreate the circumstances which galvanizes these performances, particularly when race is at the center of a character's storyline. In other words, while I wish that we had represented the neoliberal gaze without reproducing it, ultimately, I'm not sure that such a thing is possible. As Mark Fisher queries, there may be no "after" capitalism. Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, he reminds us, proclaim that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism," and now, there is a widespread sense that "it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2). Applying this to the neoliberal gaze means that there is no possibility of writing beyond this gaze. Instead, even as we critique it, we have to "yes, and" the gaze, or, write alongside it.

In other words, the pitfall of the neoliberal gaze is such that even when critiquing it through illumination, we re-create it for the audience and the performers. Amy shared the effects of this, saying, “It’s been a challenge emotionally to invite a gaze that is exotified and sexualized and Othering, um, so it’s been interesting and hard to allow myself to be Othered when, for so much of my life, I just wanted to be the same” (Artists At Play 1:19). Unfortunately, the publicity video in which Amy speaks cuts off thereafter, and we lose the distinctions Amy might have made between assimilation and Othering, as well as any unpacking of the term, “interesting.” Nonetheless, Amy’s language mirror’s reveals the impacts of working with this gaze and notes the impossibility of evading it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I theorize the neoliberal gaze through Lloyd Suh’s *The Chinese Lady*. TCL draws on scraps of history to imagine the physical journey and internal workings of Afong Moy, the first Chinese woman in America. While Afong’s presence introduced the public to ideas of Chineseness, her trafficking to the United States was motivated by mercantile desires to build consumerist desire for Chinese goods (or goods from other countries, European and Eastern, copied cheaply in Chinese factories). The United States public was initially entranced, beguiled, intrigued, delighted, and titillated by Afong, before previous presenters and the public cast her aside.

The material effects of the public’s quixotic attitude towards Afong underscores the dangers of the neoliberal gaze. While we may initially think that this gaze consumes Asian diasporic women in facile ways, the impacts of this objectification are revealed. *TCL*’s framing of Moy – as Ornamental object *and* subject, or as a subject who comes to being

through objecthood – pushes the audience to reckon with their own participation and complicity with spectatorship. Acts and interactions that may initially seem playful, minor, inobtrusive, or even complimentary, are revealed as harbingers of and impulses towards objectification and consumption. *TCL* reveals that objectification which is easily dismissed because of its aesthetic qualities, in fact, leads to consumptive destruction.

In the next chapter, I take up questions of objecthood and destruction, there better framed as disappearance, through a different lens: Celine Song's *Endlings*. Once again, I analyze the text of the play, but in the second chapter, I also take up questions of blocking, mise-en-scène, and offstage labor. *TCL* rewrites history to revise our understandings of the supposedly contemporary phenomenon of neoliberalism; cycles of violence occur and reoccur for minoritized Asian bodies from the 1800s to the present. In *Endlings*, we are located firmly in the present (or late in the second decade of the twenty-first century), yet continue to grapple with historical hauntings of neoliberalism, as well as imperialism and colonialism. *Endlings*, too, places Asian diasporic women onstage. But in *Endlings*, we move from an indictment of a specific gaze to theatrical institutions themselves.

Chapter 2: **Endlings, or “A Mythical Island without Labor”**

In February 2017, the air around Broadway back halls, LORT offices, and regional theatre watercoolers buzzed with news of the abrupt departure of Charles Isherwood, the New York Times’ second full-time critic, from the newspaper.⁵¹ When the New York Times (NYT) announced it would fill Isherwood’s position, maintaining a second full-time critic staff position, artists sprang into action. Playwright Winter Miller led a public campaign appealing to the NYT to hire a female and/or trans person of color. Lauded playwrights such as Lynn Nottage, Christopher Shinn, and Heidi Schreck signed their names. Asian diasporic artists, including David Henry Hwang, Qui Nguyen, Edward Iskandar, and May Adrales, authorized the petition in droves (W. Miller). Miller encouraged the NYT to search for Isherwood’s replacement “at outlets nationwide, in academia, and [include] those with unconventional credentials,” while playwrights encouraged each other to apply (Boroff). Six weeks after the search began, Jesse Green, who was already a theatre critic at *New York Magazine* (a somewhat lateral media outlet), was announced as Isherwood’s successor.⁵²

Theater artists were widely disappointed. American Theatre Magazine opened their initial coverage of his appointment with the question, “Another white guy?” (Weinert-Kendt, “Jesse Green”).⁵³ The subheading of Exeunt Magazine’s coverage queried, “As yet another white man is hired to the most prestigious job in US theatre criticism, Exeunt’s New York writers ask when the conversation will really change” (Serratore et al.). In a follow-up

⁵¹ Both Isherwood and Ben Brantley, the NYT’ other full-time theater critic, are white males.

⁵² Technically, Green’s position was actually a promotion from Isherwood’s; rather than be the NYT second critic, Green and Brantley are now co-critics.

⁵³ Note that this initial coverage was written by a white male journalist.

interview, Green added salt to the wound when he revealed that he had not applied for the job, but rather, was simply offered it (Weinert-Kendt, “Jesse Green”). When he questioned whether or not he was the right person for the job, given the afore-mentioned artistic call to hire a critic of color, Dean Baquet, the NYT executive editor told Green not to worry about solving all the problems of the newspaper with a single hire. Green then accepted the position.

Reviews reveal personal proclivities, education, and cultural history. As arbiters of cultural taste, artistic exegeses also shape future narrative trends and adumbrate our own interpretations of work. In other words, how we read reviews scripts how we then read theatre. Despite recent attempts to diversify reviewer pools, almost all established theatre critics are white (in both New York and nation-wide).⁵⁴ This is particularly concerning for artists of color, given the impact that reviews often impart upon on a show’s box office success. When performances by artists of color are assessed through the White Theater lens, a mode of spectatorial assessment that imposes whiteness and its historical values as the predominant framework, the impact and goals of this work are often misunderstood, leading work by artists of color to then be undervalued.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ In 2017, Rob Weinert-Kendt, the editor of *American Theatre*, wrote, “While U.S. theatres have a long way to go in terms of equity, diversity, and inclusion, they are a multicultural utopia compared to the narrow demographics of those who write about the theatre, including on the staff of this magazine (and yes, at The New York Times)” (“Criticism Needs Support”). In January 2021, Maya Phillips (a New York Times critic), confirmed, “It’s obviously a problem that there’s not more diversity in criticism. And when there is a person of color who’s a critic, there’s a very good chance they’re being tokenized; if you’re a critic of color, that’s just something you come up against in your career. It’s an unfortunate reality. A lot of these critics of color are not in a position where they feel like they have the authority or agency to speak up and represent themselves in a way that is not just as the token on staff or token freelancer” (Phillips).

⁵⁵ I use “White Theater” to foreshadow Song’s language, which I discuss further, later in this chapter.

While the global pandemic of Covid-19 cut short the New York Theatre Workshop run of Celine Song's *Endlings*, thereby rendering box office concerns irrelevant, Green's review of the opening night performance demonstrates the pitfalls of the White Theater lens. Despite the fact that Green is widely recognized for his "smart and engaging criticism," his review reveals the racialized, Eurocentric assumptions which continue to underlie theatrical taste and style in the United States (Serratore et al.). Green indicts the "tenuous connections" between the worlds in *Endling* and reads the metatheatrical playwright character as "self-absorbed" (Green). He interprets the haenyeos (해녀 sea women) as "mostly a subject in search of a theme." Green's review showcases the ways in which Orientalist thought continues to haunt wide-ranging taste hierarchies today. It stands in for a larger public attitude and understanding of Asian diasporic work which perpetuates a certain set of expectations for the "theatrical style" of Asian diasporic performance. Theatres, and their affiliates including critics and literary managers, often perpetuate neoliberal expectations of minoritized artists; plays by non-white authors are expected to showcase race as the core storyline. Thus, playwrights of color often package their work and their identities within this framework. Thus, this review portrays the commodification of identity that neoliberalism enacts. In the final portion of this chapter, I return to this beginning, and, as I've stated above, argue that Green fundamentally misunderstands Song's work. Though this chapter ends with his review, the following section begins outside of the Western context in which he writes.

This chapter moves from a brief summary of the play to a historical contextualization of the haenyeos and their labor. Simultaneously, it traces the East Asian imperialist tendencies and Western neoliberal policies which have shaped South Korea. Next, I provide

the theoretical context for *Endlings* and its interventions, follow by a brief dramaturgical analysis in which I locate neoliberalism's silent presence. The penultimate section, "Location, Labor, and Blocking," tracks the mise en scène of the world premiere and the labor required to create it. Finally, this chapter ends by reading, or rather, reading against, Green's review, because an analysis of his writing forces us to examine the stakes of Song's work.

This chapter articulates a specific affect of neoliberalism: the commodification of self. It argues that *Endlings* coheres the psychic and material experience of the commodification of self through onstage and offstage labor. Offstage labor replicates onstage labor, and *Endlings*' onstage labor expresses the impossibility of existing outside neoliberalism, thereby articulating the stakes of Asian diasporic bodies under neoliberalism. Thus, *Endlings* illustrates the insidious set of expectations that continue to plague Asian diasporic performance within the American Theater, as well as Asian diasporic bodies onstage, in everyday life, and internally.

Narrative Summary

The central focus of the first half of *Endlings* is the labor of the haenyeos – what it looks like, what its dangers are, and what it has enabled their children to do. The play takes place in the present on 만재 Man-Jae Island, where we follow a group of three haenyeo, Sook Ja, Go Min, and Han Sol, through their daily lives.⁵⁶ The world of this first half

⁵⁶ While the play officially takes place on Man-Jae, the island to which the show's producer and director traveled in preparation for the premiere was Jeju Island, which is widely acknowledged as the historically home for haenyeos. Thus, haenyeo scholarship has focused on Jeju island, and I trace the history of haenyeos in relation to it.

resembles a heightened documentary; the haenyeos, along with the help of a Voice, introduce themselves to the audience, occasionally speak in unison, and answer the Voice's questions. Thus, sometimes the audience is very much aware that they are watching a play with the haenyeos as subjects. At other times, spectators slip more easily into either an anthropological gaze or the theatrical stupor of watching another's life. Approximately a third of the way through the play, the Voice introduces herself by telling the story of her immigration, beginning with her grandmother's physical place during the division of Korea. The act then returns to the world of the haenyeos, as the story becomes increasingly dark. A storm approaches and Sook Ja, the youngest of the three, breaks her leg underwater. While Go Min and Han Sol drag her to the surface and she regains consciousness, she later dies in her shack. Act two moves to Manhattan. The Voice, now understood to be the playwright Ha Young, has just showed the first act of her new play (what we just saw) to her White Husband. As they discuss her work, a little grey mouse runs into their room and the two bemoan New York real estate. On Ha Young and White Husband's subway ride to a theatre, the three haenyeos from the first act jump into the same subway car and show off their incredible skills to the familiar New York shouts of "Showtime! Showtime!" At the Theater, Ha Young and her White Husband watch a White play, after which the location immediately flips to go under the sea for a song sung by clams about real estate.⁵⁷ In the final moments of the play, as the audience sees Ha Young and her grandmother, Han Sol, "we are right back [on the beach] where the whole show began" (Song 83). This repetition comments on the

⁵⁷ There is no definition of a "White Play," but its whiteness is inherent from the beginning. When Ha Young and White Husband sit in the audience, she asks what the play is about and he hands her the playbill cover, "which is just white HA YOUNG grabs it, flips through it, and it's all white inside too" (Song 74).

impossibility of existing outside neoliberalism by representing it visually and thematically.

Historical Currents, Man-Jae and Jeju Island, and Haenyeos' Material Working Conditions

Throughout the centuries, the haenyeos' initial emergence and changing social status has been continuously and integrally tied to (South) Korea's navigation of global economic flows, as well as its lingering imperial influences. The haenyeos in Song's *Endlings* represent the last of their kind, the final few female divers who harvest sea creatures and sea vegetables without breathing apparatuses. While the disappearance of the haenyeos is currently mourned on a national and international scale, their vanishing is unsurprising; the historical and political currents which once engendered and enabled haenyeos have now ebbed, despite lingering imperial influences. Moreover, as indigenous women on detached land masses with their own linguistic and religious traditions, haenyeos have often been multiply marginalized, separated from Korea and exploited by the mainland. Song's work centers on haenyeos in Man-Jae Island, in this section, I contextualize the status of haenyeos on Jeju Island.

I include Jeju Island's history for three reasons: one, scholarship traces the development of haenyeos skills to Jeju, implying that haenyeos originated here before moving elsewhere (such as Man-Jae); two, there is significant historical and scientific research on the haenyeos on Jeju with almost no scholarship on those on Man-Jae, and three, Sammi Cannold, the director of the first two productions and Diane Borger, A.R.T.'s Executive Producer, both traveled to Jeju to research the production (but not Man-Jae) ("From Man-Jae"). Though scholars continue to debate haenyeos' social empowerment relative to male (island) farmers and mainland women, the divers serve as a case study in the

historical navigation of gendered expectations of labor in Korea.⁵⁸ In the ensuing section, I track haenyeos across four periods, building on scholarly divisions of Jeju labor: tributary (prior to 1910), colonial (1910-1945), transitional (1945 to the end of the 1960s), and industrial (the end of the 1960s through the present) (Gwon 117).⁵⁹

There is little recorded information about the haenyeos before and during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910), though scholars have found traces of activity. Starting in 503 AD, historical accounts show breath-holding male divers in Jeju (Lee and Lee 1). Though they appear much more rarely, female breath-holding divers have been recorded since the 17th century in Chosŏn dynasty picture books (“Culture of Jeju Haenyeo” 1:46).⁶⁰ As Neo-Confucianism became the dominant value system of Chosŏn government, seclusion norms, laws, and observant local administrators prohibited men from diving, which led to women diving (Gwon 118). Though haenyeos were outliers in the 1600s, a heavy tax was imposed on male divers in the 17th century, leading to an increase of female divers. Thus, Jeju’s female land farmers also began to forage the sea. But this increase in household contributions did not lead haenyeos out of subsistence or to increased social power. Instead, haenyeos were “in essence slaves owned by a governmental office... accorded the lowest social status

⁵⁸ Chang Hoon Ko, for example, argues that “Jeju women represent an example of equitable gender roles beyond the scope of traditional Korean Confucian stereotypes” (58). Ko makes clear the importance of haenyeo contributions and convincingly argues that haenyeos challenged traditional Korean Confucian expectations of women. However, the fact that haenyeos may have pulled gender relations in Jeju in a “more egalitarian direction when juxtaposed with the mainland,” does not mean haenyeos held equal standing (as men) or did not experience diminished socioeconomic power in comparison to Jeju men, farmers, mainland Koreans, or the Japanese.

⁵⁹ Jeju-based scholar Gwi-Sook Gwon tracks haenyeo labor history through three periods: the last three on this list. I add the earlier historical period to provide further context.

⁶⁰ Some articles claim that the haenyeo can be traced back to sometime around 430 A.D., but I have yet to find scholarly confirmation of this.

within the community.”⁶¹ The divers were responsible for providing tributes of brown algae and abalone – a heavy economic burden. Nonetheless, the number of haenyeos continued to increase into the 19th century, eventually comprising up to 22% of the entire female population in Jeju (Lee and Lee 1). In the 19th century, haenyeos still dove infrequently, spending most of their time as land farmers. But as Western imperial powers increasingly encroached upon China and Japan in the 1800s, the number of women diving began to increase even further, as did as their social importance, for the first time. Beginning in the 19th century, Japanese imperial interests pushed Korea into global trade exchanges, which increased the precarity of Korean farmers, divers, and other low wage workers.⁶²

In the twentieth century, from 1910 to 1945, Japan reshaped Korea’s economic system to support and meet the needs of Japan’s economy; these new markets created increased economic opportunities for hanyeos, which led to haenyeo products becoming market commodities for the first time. Japan concurrently expanded Korean markets for Japanese goods and capital investment and developed Korean industries to better supply Japan with specific foods and materials (Shim and Lee 49). Because of Jeju’s close proximity

⁶¹ Gwon’s source is Gun Lee’s *Jeju Pungtogi*, accessed through The Committee of Jeju Education. In her footnotes, she writes, “The year of publication is not exactly known. From the contents of the book, it was probably written during the eighteenth century.” While this reference does draw attention to the slipperiness of historical research, it also highlights the ways in which haenyeos have been marginalized.

⁶² Peasant farmers struggled to adapt to inflating costs of daily living, exacerbated by droughts in 1876 and 1888, while Japanese fishing companies encroached on coastal Korean operations. Though there is little scholarship on Jeju inhabitants during the 1800s, with geographic (Jeju’s waters are challenging to navigate) and linguistic isolation (Jeju has its own dialect, now classified as an endangered language), the relative isolation from Korea’s mainland made island dwellers and their support networks particularly fragile. In 2010, UNESCO added Jejueo, also known as Cheju, Ceycwu, and Jeju, to its “Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger.” Jeju is currently demarcated as “critically endangered, as almost all of its speakers (aside from a small contingency in Japan) are at least 70 years old and remain in Jeju” (“New Interactive Atlas”).

to Japan, divers and farmers on the island were particularly affected. As Japanese demand raised seafood prices, the products of haenyeos' diving became more monetarily valuable than the products of farm work (Lee and Myong 5). Haenyeos (officially) shifted from paying tribute to engaging in market exchanges. As a quarter of Jeju's population, predominantly young men, traveled to Japan (initially as forced laborers and later soldiers), haenyeos transitioned into the economic position of breadwinners (Gwon 119). The island's economic focus, previously farmland, became fisheries and fishing villages.

Haenyeos' increased earning power did not equate to labor rights or social acceptance.⁶³ While wage labor technically recompensed them with more funds, haenyeos were not in control of their labor conditions; they could no longer determine access to their product or its lifeblood (the sea). Before Japanese colonization, sea "field access" was unrestricted. But after colonization, merchants purchased the rights of monopoly in sea fields; haenyeos who dove in these areas were then forced to sell their products to specific merchants. While there were attempts to organize trade unions in 1920, these unions became controlled by Japanese, or (less frequently) Korean, merchants, which led to the disvaluing of haenyeo products. The price of haenyeo goods fell by 50% in the mid-1920s, illustrating haenyeo instability and market dependence (Gwon 121). In 1932, haenyeos and local socialists demonstrated in front of the union representative. After arrests, the haenyeos' demands were partially accepted. But the discrepancy in labor relations continued throughout the colonial era. There are no records of a haenyeo ever ascending to owning or managing the factories and trade companies which processed and distributed sea gleanings.

⁶³ Socially, Jeju men did not attempt to learn diving skills, despite the fact that haenyeos often earned more than their husbands.

Because divers from Jeju were more skilled than those from other areas (possibly due to Jeju's challenging environment), Jeju-based haenyeos migrated all over Korea, Japan, China, and Russia; haenyeos became Korea's first seasonal migrant laborers (Gwon 121). Many divers eagerly took advantage of this wage labor, even as it further exposed them to risk. Migrant haenyeos were contract workers, bound to an agreement determined by a Japanese sea field leaseholder.⁶⁴ Leaseholders hired male (often Korean) supervisors, who also functioned as recruiters, guides, accountants, and wage distributors. Supervisors manipulated, abused, and stymied haenyeos to varying degrees. They commonly inflicted physical beatings, delayed or unpaid wages, and sexual coercion upon haenyeos, sometimes refusing to allow divers to return home because of "debt payments" (Gwon 123). Nonetheless, because a migrant haenyeo's seasonal wage *could* provide up to several times that of Jeju-based diver, some continued to pursue "out-bound" contracts.

In the mid-1930s, Japan began to expand industrialization across its colonies. This development accelerated after 1937, leading to a (Korean) urban migration, often forced and enforced by the Japanese, and Korea's first industrial revolution (1935 – 1945).⁶⁵ In 1945, Allied forces helped liberate Korea from Japanese rule. But this liberation, or *haebang*, did not create stability for Jeju's haenyeos, or Jeju itself.⁶⁶

Japanese imperialist policies left Korea with a diminutive middle class. The dearth of upward mobility encouraged popular resistance, organized labor union activity, armed guerilla resistance, and so-called "Communists" to rise against the United States' post-war

⁶⁴ Leases were granted by the army and regional government.

⁶⁵ Despite this colonial activity, most of Korean remained fundamentally agrarian and subsistent.

⁶⁶ Koreans call the August 15, 1945 liberation from Japan, "*haebang*" (Cummings 186).

support of a small, conservative government and Korea's division (Cumings 202).⁶⁷ Within five years, Korea was enmeshed in the Korean War (1950 – 1953). More locally, within three years of Japan's World War II defeat, Jeju witnessed the cataclysmic April 3 Uprising (1948 – 1954).

Political tensions within South Korea and Jeju engendered this revolt, but the April 3 Uprising is also representative of the ways in which Jeju operated as a proxy in the crosshairs of United States – Soviet tensions over Korea's future as a right wing or leftist country.⁶⁸ Scholars broadly agree that the uprising's first major marker occurred on April 3rd 1948, when the leadership of the South Korean Communist Party Jeju Committee led an armed rebellion against the South Korean Interim Government (SKIG) and by proxy, the United States, attacking police stations and killing right-wing politicians on Jeju ("Seeking Truth" 408).⁶⁹ After 100 police reinforcement forces proved unsuccessful, responsibility for retaliation quickly transferred to the military, along with anti-communist paramilitary groups and local police (who were controlled by the United States military). Skirmishes continued for the next six years. Military counterinsurgent strategies included "mass arrest and

⁶⁷ Of course, the dynamics therein are significantly more nuanced and remain a source of scholarly debate. The South did contain ardent leftists but it also contained a landlord class of "obtuse reactionaries and vibrant capitalists." It is perhaps unsurprising that the United States misunderstood the dynamics at play, as American intelligence chose which politicians they wanted to back in the new government within a week of landing in Korea. Adding to this absurd timeline and obvious lack of analysis, Korean society did not have the political background for the United State's imposition of a "democratic" system. Amongst other influences, more broadly, the United States' navigation of Korea's post-war division and ensuing political machinations was influenced by its concerns of Soviet power. See Cumings p. 174 – 298 for more.

⁶⁸ "The April 3rd Uprising" and "the 4 • 3 Incident" refer to both the first violent confrontation and the ensuing series of conflicts. Here, I am referring to the latter, i.e. the multi-year conflict.

⁶⁹ Scholars do, however, debate the exact starting date, causes, and responsible parties of the April 3rd Uprising.

detention, forced relocation, torture, indiscriminate killing and the large-scale massacre of civilians” (“Seeking Truth” 410). In an attempt to escape the violence, some residents fled villages for Jeju’s mountainous areas or hid in caves. Often the military did not distinguish between hiding civilians and potential guerrillas, killing indiscriminately under the guise of eradicating leftists. Those who remained, the elderly and children, were forced into hard labor (Jeju 4·3 Peace Foundation 393 – 394). A 2009 truth commission, South Korea’s first Truth Commission, estimates that 25,000 – 35,000 islanders, predominantly young men, were victims of “the 4 · 3 Incident.” These numbers imply that almost every household in Jeju was affected (Jeju 4·3 Peace Foundation 455).⁷⁰ Approximately 300 villages, 20,000 households, and 40,000 houses were destroyed (Jeju 4·3 Peace Foundation 466-468).

One of the military’s most insidious strategies was the Guilt-by-association System, which was originally established during Japanese colonial rule. In the Guilt-by-association System, distant relatives and/or descendants of a leftist (or supposed leftist) are “controlled” by the recorded inheritance of leftist adjacency; their social activities and opportunities for certain positions are curtailed. Statistically, the Truth Commission states that the Guilt-by-association System impacted a majority of Jeju people. Socially, “Jeju, known as a community of strong blood ties has suffered immensely, and the negative influence that the Guilt-by-association system has played is beyond our imagination” (Jeju 4·3 Peace Foundation 609-610).

⁷⁰ See also “Seeking Truth” and Jeju 4·3 Peace Foundation, pages 451 – 463, for a discussion of the politics concerning the disparate estimations of victims, differently reported by the United States Army Forces in Korea, Jeju governors, the 1960 Special Committee on Massacres of Citizens, and the recent National Committee for Investigation of the Truth about the Jeju 4.3 Events.

As new institutions developed on Jeju in the 1950s, the inherited social and legal practices from the colonial era infected the island and haenyeo labor relations. The April 3 Uprising broke apart many households and killed many young men. Though the surviving women were responsible for familial survival and the island's economy, male sons were increasingly valued, as they could continue the family line. This, in turn, cheapened women's work, devaluing the haenyeos' labor power (Gwon 125). Though leasing the sea was technically illegal after 1950, merchants still continued to control haenyeo labor and products by purchasing "gathering" rights from corrupt unions. The same abuses inflicted decades before upon migrant haenyeos, including beatings, wage manipulation, and sexual coercion, were now perpetuated by predominantly Korean merchants. The number of haenyeos rose, due in part to resumed trade relations with Japan in 1962 and the ensuing expanding algae market; in 1965, 21.2% of all Jeju women over fifteen functioned as haenyeos (Gwon 125).⁷¹ But once again, this increase in numbers did not equate to greater social value.⁷²

In contrast to the general trend of the past centuries, the latter half of the twentieth century and ensuing decades have led to a marked decline in haenyeo numbers. In 1962, the official number of Jeju haenyeos was 26,248 (Lee and Lee 2). Currently, according to the Jeju Haenyeo Museum's December 2019 records, there are 3,820 (해녀관련 통계).

Additionally, the disappearing numbers of haenyeos have accelerated. Out of the haenyeos who remain, approximately 31% are in their sixties, 42% are in their seventies, and 16% are

⁷¹ Given language constraints, I cite Gwon here, rather than her original source. Her data comes from "Kyôngjaegi haekwon Chosatonggaeguk, In 'guk mik juteak census bogo: Jejudo [Census report on population and households: Jejudo], 1972."

⁷² For example, Jeju's magazine, published by the local government, did not publish a single article noting haenyeo economic contributions over the twenty year period of 1961 to 1980 (Gwon 126).

in their eighties and nineties (해녀관련 통계). In other words, as a labor force, haenyeos are dying out.

To mention a haenyeo is to invoke a ghost. Haenyeos are beings in transit, embodied receptacles of historical memory. Because haenyeos are defined by their labor and this labor will soon cease, haenyeos now operate symbolically, both in the South Korean national dialectic, and in the diasporic South Korean imagination. How did this come to pass?

After Korea's "Forgotten War" ended in 1953, foreign aid, investment, and trading quickly began to shape South Korea's economy and government.⁷³ Liberated from Japanese dominion, South Korea rapidly industrialized; President Park's "guided capitalism" moved the country into a new stage of development. Chaebols, or family-owned conglomerates (which became soon moved beyond "families"), closely collaborated with local and state politicians and bureaucracy, leading to monopolistic control of domestic markets and an export-heavy economy. In 1960, the GDP per capita was \$79. By 1989, it rose to \$5,438.24 (Howe 18). Stimuli for the "Miracle on the River," as it has been termed, was heavily supported by loans from Japan, foreign direct investment (FDI) from international communities, particularly the United States, and engagement in international trading (Howe 19). This focus on industrialization led South Koreans (including Jeju Islanders) to migrate to cities. Once again, haenyeo practices (and other forms of physical labor) were socially devalued, as the nation focused on developing steel, cars, and silicon chips. In 1970, Korea was 86% dependent on foreign imports of machine tools; by the mid-1980s, South Korea was globally third to manufacture 286-bit silicon chips (used in computers) (Cummings 325).

⁷³ United States rhetoric termed this a war between capitalism and communism – perhaps an attempt to justify and successfully bury the mass murders of civilians (Kim 538).

When growth “dropped” in the 1990s, South Korea shifted away state-mediated loans, investing further in company assets and the stock market, aligning itself more closely with global neoliberal practices. The Dae Jung government, for example, implemented neoliberal reforms under IMF guidance after the financial crisis, inserting it into a kind of “global turbo-capitalism” (Hyun-Chin and Jin-Ho 2).

On Jeju island itself, a national focus on development and an influx of foreign money also led to development on the island – in the name of tourism. Billed as “The Hawaii of Korea,” the island usually offers visa-free entry.⁷⁴ Now, ironically, the haenyeos’ small numbers and their potential draw as a tourist attraction have led haenyeos to be *more* valued. South Korea now recognizes the forthcoming loss of cultural practices and in turn, the government has sought UNESCO designations. These designations, as they are granted, also help bring in international money, both in terms of development and travel. “Traditional” haenyeo culture has now been commoditized for Jeju’s tourist industry.

Despite the documentaries, photography exhibitions, and magazine profiles in the last decade that have increased Western interest in the haenyeos, (with varying degrees of romanticization), the lived experience of haenyeo work is physically exhausting, both inside and outside the water.⁷⁵ For most of the year, the season and tides around Jeju allow haenyeos to dive or harvest. Haenyeos dive for up to seven hours a day while they also work in farm fields, sometimes within the same day: a haenyeo may reap potatoes in the morning, before diving in the afternoon, and then cleaning her catch in the evening.⁷⁶ Haenyeos dive

⁷⁴ Usual entry practices have been suspended in the wake of Covid-19.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Sang-Hun’s article, “Hardy Divers in Korea Strait, ‘Sea Women’ Are Dwindling,” or Hyung S. Kim’s 2015 photography exhibit, “Haenyeo,” which was also covered in the New Yorker.

⁷⁶ Rice doesn’t grow on Jeju Island.

when the season and tides are appropriate (Lee and Lee 3). Sometimes, even when pregnant, they even dive up until to the day of delivery (Chun 2010). When they are not hunting for sea creatures, in the late springtime, some haenyeos harvest mauve agar, a jelly thickener used in food derived from seawood in the Hado Sea, or chop at hijiki, a golden-brown sea algae that grows on rocks in the Jigwido Sea.

Long-term diving also has health risks, though some elderly haenyeos find it easier to move in water's buoyancy than on land. In order to dive effectively, haenyeos have to withstand extreme cold and increasing pressure on their ears and eyes. Dives often last between 1-2 minutes and haenyeos push themselves to dive up to 12 meters deep.⁷⁷ While diving in these cold waters can increase capillary capacity, it can also lead to long-term nausea and tinnitus; some haenyeos take motion sickness pills to adapt, and discomfort can be compounded by the stink of rubber suits and the disorientation that comes from their old-fashioned scuba masks (Lee and Lee 4-5). Because haenyeos are constantly battling the human body's natural tendency to float, many also wear weights on their backs, which can make diving easier – and returning to the ocean surface harder. While news sources debate the number of fatalities, one newspaper approximated that in recent years, about ten haenyeos per year have died while fishing (황석주).

In addition to physical fortitude, diving as a haenyeo takes technical prowess, as well as maritime and underwater geologic knowledge. Haenyeos hunt for a wide variety of sea creatures including sea urchins, conches, abalone, octopi, and fish. Some creatures, like sea

⁷⁷ As Lee and Lee write, "According to the diving skill, *haenyeos* are classified into three groups: [Class 1], [Class 2], and [Class 3]. Class 1 is able to dive deeper than about 16 m in depth with 2 min-breath-holding (Chaw et al., 2005), Class 2 is about 13 m in depth, and Class 3 dive shallower than 13 m" (3).

urchins, are nocturnal and crawl into crevasses and under rocks during the day, making attempts to ferret them out particularly challenging. Others, such as abalone, are increasingly rare, due to climate change, rising ocean acidity, and increased pollution. Then again, so are the haenyeos themselves.

Self-Commodification as a Theoretical Mode of Feeling

As labor flexibility, decreasing institutional support, and financial speculation pervade the Transpacific, accompanying affects follow these neoliberal traits. In this section, I contextualize one neoliberal affect – a mode of feeling which places the burden of success upon the individual, thereby requiring the subject to commodify themselves – and artistic labor as a conduit for expressing and perpetuating this affect. This mode of feeling, one cost of neoliberalism, shapes identity formation and labor. Given increasingly precarious work environments, many minoritarian subjects are now severed from institutional affiliation and organizational or government support, which provide social capital, kinship networks, identity referents, and financial aid. Without these support systems (porous though they may be), *Endlings* (and more specifically, Ha Young), shows us the ways in which minoritarian subjects vacillate between commodifying their identities within a scarcity mindset and commodifying their labor force in a market that diminishes them. Asian diasporic subjects already struggle with expectations stemming from the model minority myth, which, as David Palumbo-Liu argues, were crafted by conservatives to “show” that institutional racism and economic violence weren’t real (Palumbo-Liu 172). Nonetheless, fantasies of success, or what Lauren Berlant terms “the good life,” proliferate.

The good life, a “moral-intimate-economic thing,” consists of dreams that convince people of “enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work,” despite all evidence to the contrary (Berlant 2). Though most subjects remain forever mired in the miasma of the ordinary, the ordinary nonetheless becomes suffused with fantasies. Despite its seeming positivity, the fantasy of the good life is actually a relation of cruel optimism; it exists “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (Berlant 1). While object/scenarios are not inherently cruel, they become so when people or worlds are bound to situations which simultaneously threaten and affirm them (Berlant 2). As it becomes more and more unachievable, the fantasy good life inevitably fragments. Precarious bodies, individuals, and scenarios experience “dramas of adjustment” as subjects try to make sense of gap between fantasies of what could be and the disorganized reality of the status quo. Yet despite this inevitable fragmentation, subjects still find myriad ways to hope, survive, and reinvest. The sustained internalization of this “animating fantasy” overlaps with model minority expectations of Asian American success and visibility.

Poet Cathy Park Hong deconstructs the affective conflict surrounding Asian diasporic assimilation. First, Hong articulates assimilation as voidance.⁷⁸ In Hong’s framework, this disappearance as personal, relational, and global construct slips between the tangible, the socially recognized, and the internalized. Hong argues that Asian diasporic people exist

⁷⁸ Take, for example *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, which is often publicized as the first play to emerge out of the Asian American liberation movement of the 1960s. Frank Chin’s seminal and acerbic protagonist, Tam Lum, spews tirades which are meant to hail both the fury and virility of Asian men. The main character in Young Jean Lee’s *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* also responds with alternate passivity and violence to her displacement, caught between a white couple and her South Korean peers.

outside of paradigms of racial understanding and articulation in the United States. Instead, they navigate a framework of racial invisibility. Trapped inside this “vague purgatorial status,” Asian diasporic subjects question the validity of their experiences as racialized beings, while also working furiously to move beyond these experiences (C. Hong 12).⁷⁹

To assert a racialized Asian diasporic experience, Hong strings together autobiographical experiences of racism and their accompanying affects. In one exchange, a white man challenges Hong to prove that Asians aren’t “next in line to be white” (C. Hong 19). This comment assumes proximity to whiteness, and accompanying markers of social mobility and financial stability, as desirable. But Hong refuses to see this racial adjacency as a form of ascendancy. Instead, she reframes racial adjacency (to whiteness) as the disappearance of Asian diasporic identity. In this articulation, assimilation does not equate to empowerment, but rather to absorption.⁸⁰ She tells us, “When I hear [this] phrase... I replace the word ‘white’ with ‘disappear.’ Asians are next in line to disappear. We are reputed to be so accomplished, and so law-abiding, we will disappear into this country’s amnesiac fog” (C. Hong 31). Here, Hong also implicitly rejects the specter expectations of “the model minority.”

In the framework of the model minority, the socially acceptable goal for Asian Americans is upward class mobility. The model minority goal of class ascension, Palumbo-Liu affirms, serves as a model for other minorities to follow in the process of Americanization (Palumbo-Liu 157). However, this financial stability does not need to be

⁷⁹ One interpretation of this double bind could compare Hong’s racial invisibility to that of the Black narrator in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

⁸⁰ Hong does not focus on the process of Asian diasporic identity formation, but the state of its end result. Scholar such as Sean Metzger and SanSan Kwan assert that this identity formation is constantly in flux.

accompanied by media representation or self-value. Upward class mobility, as Hong alludes, and Berlant asserts, is now all-too-often a fantasy.⁸¹ Nonetheless, this fantasy sticks, motivating Asian diasporic people to work harder and harder (as the labor of the haenyeos shows). The overlap between the good life and Asian diasporic “success” is not just the increasing unlikelihood of fulfilling these fantasies, but also the work required to (theoretically) achieve them: an unceasing grind of labor which is internalized as a personal responsibility, rather than systemic exploitation. If Asian racial identity is insistently “beside the point” and holds no causality in “being bullied, or passed over for promotion, or cut off every time we talk,” then these faults must be individual (C. Hong 31). If a small number of Asian diasporic people can “prove” the validity of the model minority myth through economic success, then the problem always lies with those who can’t keep up.

Thus, the Asian diasporic psyche is manipulated into believing that a lack of recognition and/or success is the result of personal shortcomings, rather than systemic patterns of structural inequity, alienation, and exploitation. How can Asian diasporic people compensate for individualized failure? Work hard – “five times harder,” Hong tells us – to prove self-worth. As a singular example of the accompanying neoliberal affect, Hong can’t stop tying her own personal value to capital, even though she recognizes it as a trap laid by white ideology. Will she ever stop feeling “not enough, never enough,” she questions, if her net worth expands (C. Hong 31)? If assimilation leads to disappearance, is it even possible to accrue enough money (whatever that means) without vanishing, without being enfolded in a white, capitalist ideology that exploited her ancestors and exploits her now? Hong’s

⁸¹ The shrinking middle class has been a concern for decades. Covid-19’s effects on upward class mobility is the latest example of increasing disparity (Kochhar).

questions are rhetorical but they still lead us to imagine this cycle of labor and self-erasure: portraying this cycle is where *Endling* intervenes. Hong's work articulates the affective stakes of erasure; Dorinne Kondo's "reparative mirroring" posits one way that theater can counter this constant, mediatized exclusion.

Reparative mirroring asserts the "fully rounded public existence" of minoritarian subjectivities through onstage and filmed representation (Kondo 12). While all artistic labor, including onstage representation, is power laden, Kondo argues that reparative mirroring can remake race in ways that challenge a power-evasive, universal "I" (Kondo 12). These performances reveal the ways in which individuals negotiate race and class hegemonies; for minoritarian subjects, reparative mirroring can be life giving (Kondo 15). Reparative mirroring also nuances Peggy Phelan's critique of the ideology of the visible.

The ideology of the visible contradicts the notion that expanded representation leads to greater political power. Within Western representation, the frequent (and narrow) visibility of the other is often used as a means of controlling those with less power. While Phelan is quick to note that strategies of active disappearance have largely been a possibility for white middle- and upper-class women, her focus on performances that mark disappearance still presume a lived presence (165). This framework runs counter to the reality of some minoritarian subjects, such as *Endlings*' haenyeos, whose representation marks both their current existence and their impending extinction. But though the stakes of visibility may differ according to subject positionality, Phelan's intervention to assess performances that make representation counterfeit, or work "in which the costs of women's perpetual aversion are clearly measured," still proves useful (165). By marking disappearance and the costs of disappearance, we notate its consequences.

Because theater itself is a contested field, theater is still a form of culture which holds the repressed contradictions of capital, and thus, operates as a capacious container for thinking through the impacts of neoliberalism on a specific Asian diasporic experience of disappearance.⁸² Kondo notes that “theater helps us theorize racial affect, linking the phenomenological and the structural, in vividly experiential, embodied performances of public feelings” (Kondo 15). This embodiment can be read as public feelings, and can also be read as a form of labor. If, as David Harvey asserts, the political project of neoliberalism was predicated by the corporate capitalist class’ desire to curb the power of labor, then tracking the contemporary production of neoliberal affect (within theater) requires us to assess the power of labor right now (again, in theater) (1). While the narrative of *Endlings* begins far from American Theater, the show argues that Theater – its institutions, their overwhelmingly white seasons, and the labor required to make productions – also perpetuates neoliberal relations itself. In parallel, *Endlings* critiques attempts to uphold the model minority myth and achieve the good life, and the physical, mental, and affective work that goes into this.

The Dramaturgical Absence of Neoliberalism

The preceding historical context details the ways in which haenyeo history is integrally tied to South Korea’s navigation of global economic flows and lingering imperial influences. In *Endlings*, haenyeos Han Sol, Go Min, and Sook Ja, as well as Ha Young, the Asian diasporic woman, mirror this history. The previous theoretical context highlights the psychic experience of living under neoliberalism, or more specifically, the self-commodification to which model minorities are especially subject. In this section, I argue

⁸² See work such as Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* for further discussion of the ways in which cultural forms hold capitalism’s contradictions.

that neoliberalism operates as *Endlings*'s driving frame, even though its presence is never articulated. Instead, Song shows the audience the effects of neoliberalism in the present moment through the implicit comparison between the haenyeos and Ha Young.

Throughout *Endlings*, we are forced to ask why, despite their obvious circumstantial differences, do the haenyeos and Ha Young feel so similar? What is gained through Song's (often literal) side-by-side comparison of them? The obvious response is that these characters resemble one another because of their shared cultural background of Korean identity. But *Endlings* pushes the audience beyond a simplistic response of "cultural inheritance" or a reductive understanding of diasporic South Korean identity formation.⁸³ Song prioritizes comparing, or rather, paralleling, Ha Young and the haenyeos over developing a single protagonist as a strategy for forcing the audience to consider what maintains the status quo: neoliberalism.

Artistically, *Endlings* melds Aristotelian dramatic arc (seen in the hero haenyeos' eventual death), tragi-comic European absurdism (viewed through the haenyeos' cyclical conversations and the repetitive White Theatre mantras), and video game narratives in which dramatic action encompasses both the mundane and character choice (portrayed, for example, in Song's recent Twitch streaming of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* via The Sims).⁸⁴

⁸³ While the haenyeo existence itself complicates the idea of "Koreanness," given that most historical haenyeos were indigenous (as was detailed in the previous section), Song's work does not frame the haenyeos as native Jeju Island inhabitants.

⁸⁴ Initial performances of *The Seagull* in the 1800s were denounced for their depictions of everyday life. As audiences became accustomed to dramatic renditions with less presentational qualities, *The Seagull* became increasingly popular. One reviewer, Helen Shaw, noted that the Sims framework for Song's recent iteration sets up similarly casual scenarios: "what was and wasn't in [Song's] power seemed to change every minute: She could set up romantic dates, or summon the group to watch a little performance, but unprompted interactions could also be shockingly *Seagull*-esque." Shaw also notes the presence of labor in this production, perhaps paralleling the labor in *Endlings*. She writes, "I

Through this lens, the first half of the play functions as both introduction and development. The “twist” or rising action straddles the act break, as the Playwright is revealed to be the meta-narrator, as well as a character on her own heroic journey. Character development jolts along in vignettes, before the theoretical climax (Sook Ja’s death), and the conclusion.

Endlings can be read as a map that is constituted by both Song’s own experiences and larger cultural histories. On a literal scale, *Endlings* connects the local and the global, by moving between two locales; *Endlings* locates two places, Man-Jae Island and Manhattan, and the connections between the two geographies. Less literally, these connections are transnational, material, and affective, as the work simultaneously acknowledges the systematic oppression of gentrification and the specific materiality of artistic practice and surrounding community.

Endlings personalizes the effects of neoliberalism upon the haenyeos in several ways; firstly, and most importantly, the never-ending nature of the haenyeos’ labor shows the ways in which neoliberal subjects are forced into flexibility and repetition. The haenyeos constantly joke about this, saying things like, “earn it in the afterlife,” acknowledging that their work leads them towards death (Song 20).⁸⁵ The historical specificity of this work, too, is mired in death. For example, their whistle, the narrator tells us, is termed the sound of “coming back from death” (Song 18). But in this life, they can never stop working, even when one of them dies. When Sook Ja almost drowns at sea and needs to rest on the beach, Han Sol and Go Min go back out to make up the difference. Han Sol says, “We’re going

think Song’s game-play/play-game managed the trick by capturing the experience not of *going* to a show but of *working* on one.”

⁸⁵ For clarity, future quotes are cited from Song’s NYTW rehearsal draft, and visual readings reference the private recording.

back in to make up for your work” (Song 50). The day after Sook Ja dies, the other two head back out. Once again, this repetition comments on the impossibility of existing outside of neoliberal working conditions.

Secondly, the Voice of the narrator in the first half encourages a distanced, sometimes anthropological view of the haenyeos, to which they themselves adhere. Kondo notes that ethnography may operate “as an essentialist discourse of culture,” which the haenyeos initially play into (Kondo 48). When the Voice introduces them, the haenyeos wink, primp, and flirt, undermining expectations of docility and age-appropriate behavior for octogenarians, but they also perform their haenyeo identity but showing off their accessories, wares, and sea goods. When the Voice tells Han Sol to “show everybody what you have in your hands,” she shows off her rusty knife (Song 16). When the Voice asks what else she has, she offers her net, then her buoy, and then dives on cue to “bring back some shellfish for us [the audience].” The performance of her labor is always in service of the audience’s consumption. The nature of this performance is underscored by the lived experience of haenyeos (outside of *Endlings*), and the ways in which their work is now a performance of South Korean identity. As I previously mentioned, UNESCO has now designated Jeju haenyeo culture as an example of South Korea’s Intangible Cultural Heritage.

But this designation, as an UNESCO Courier article demonstrates, may actually lead non-haenyeos to misunderstand or infantilize them. For example, Katerina Markelov declares that, “Since the 1970s, the work of the haenyeo is no longer an imperative; it has now become a conscious choice.” While it’s unclear exactly what Markelov means by this, it’s also easy to imagine that many contemporary haenyeos see their work as the best of their limited employment options (they are still on Jeju, Man-jae, or other isolated islands).

Simultaneously, Markelov is struck by the modesty of the haenyeos and hopes that “international recognition will undoubtedly restore [their] self-esteem and confidence.” While this is a brief piece in the *Courier* (UNESCO’s main magazine), not an academic journal, the tone of this sentiment is nonetheless striking, as it again, infantilizes the haenyeos. Perhaps what reads as low self-esteem to some is actually an awareness of how their work is usually valued in a neoliberal context. What is at stake here is not whether or not the haenyeos are an example of intangible cultural heritage (they are), but exactly how this designation has materially improved the lives of the haenyeos, other than leading them to become further commodified, by both their government and various international institutions.⁸⁶

Finally, haenyeos also demonstrate the neoliberal bind of international interconnectivity alongside material disparity. Every night after work, the haenyeos watch television. As Han Sol says, “Have you seen all the shows on television? Do you know how good they are? It’s the golden age of television” (Song 15). This snippet of dialogue makes Han Sol entirely relatable; the second decade in the twenty-first century has created, as many think pieces state, a second golden age of television.⁸⁷ But when Han Sol actually talks to her granddaughter (Ha Young), their worlds are so far apart that she’s unable to understand much of Ha Young’s existence. She says,

Youtube?
Instagram?
Luxury rentals in Williamsburg starting at \$4200?
Cozy east village studio with sunny windows \$2800?
I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about sweetheart (Song 40).

⁸⁶ To be fair, Markelov declares that local authorities have created free medical coverage since 2002 and the free distribution of diving suits to help “preserve” this heritage. The current status and reception of these efforts is unknown.

⁸⁷ Thompson.

Ha Young simply can't track what her granddaughter is sharing; while Ha Young and Han Sol may be connected, we sense that their everyday experience is worlds apart.

In juxtaposing the two worlds of Man-Jae and Manhattan, Song questions the playwright's theoretical freedom to pursue her dream, presenting the tangible constraints of her world alongside the tangible constraints of the haenyeos'. While Song does not imply that the two worlds harbor the same tenuous line between life and death, this juxtaposition forces the audience to query what the playwright's stakes are, and to consider what kind of death she, herself, might be dancing with. This potential death, I argue, is within her psyche as she internalizes the (racialized) neoliberal gaze, or, as she commodifies herself.

When her husband first asks her why she wrote the first act, she discovers that she was bribed into writing this play by "white people's attention" and "white people's real estate" (Song 67). But while some audience members may judge Ha Young's self-revelation, others might find it strangely liberating. For the latter, this admittance might be a moment of Kondo's reparative mirroring; all financially insecure minoritized artists go through their own navigations of power in White Theater. "White people's attention," after all, leads to security, financial stability, success. Moreover, Ha Young does not simplify this navigation, but instead, mires it in competing desires to dominate, submit, and ultimately, dominate through submission. Moments after she's acknowledged the trap in which she's written the play, Ha Young addresses the audience for their consideration, just "in case [they] run a fellowship or a residency or an award" (Song 70). She says,

I just want to write plays in the clouds
I don't want to think about real estate all the time
I don't want to live like a real estate agent
I want to live in the air
Like an astronaut

Or a youtube video (Song 70).

Even as Ha Young attempts imagine beyond real estate, to literally transcend these earthly constraints, she ends up in a YouTube video, once again selling herself for eager spectators.

Real estate, to Ha Young, is both a literal desire and a metaphor for Berlant's "good life." The good life is almost impossibly difficult to achieve, particularly in the capitalist hub of Manhattan and in the notoriously under-paying field of theatre. Ha Young wants to leave her toxic relationship with theatre, which is detrimental, in no small part, because it robs her daily, starves her, and "has nothing to give [her] at all" (Song 74). But the bind of the good life is that we must drive ourselves unceasingly as workers to achieve a semblance of it. While Ha Young desperately desires an apartment without a rat running underneath the furniture, she just can't quit what she loves – theatre. Ha Young knows that she has to self-commodify in order to get attention, support, and awards, but she still wants theatrical success. In this way, theatre functions as a mechanism for cruel optimism; theatrical success drives her, while simultaneously imposing an emotional experience onto her that is destructive. Ha Young acknowledges that "money is a myth," but the day-to-day requirements of daily existence still torment her. She needs to "make lots of money" and knows that "real estate is a myth," but she still needs to "buy land anyway" (Song 75).

It's worth nothing that these moments are often humorous; Ha Young, similar to the haenyeos, doesn't waste time on self-pity. But these constant refrains of the desire for real estate, whether couched in a conversation between Ha Young and her White Husband about the costs of the creative process, an invocation from Ha Young to the audience about the driving impulse for *Endlings*, or a moment of surrealist clams chanting "there is no real estate under the sea," show that the only real freedom from this precarious existence is death (Song

68). In one of her later monologues, Ha Young imagines her body occupying more space than she'll ever be allowed. She says,

And even that's not enough
It's not enough
So I keep expanding and expanding
There's no limit to how far I stretch out
I keep stretching and stretching
Pulled apart infinitely
Until I cover the whole world
My skin becomes the air
And my body becomes the rich earth
Growing barley and rice
Real estate
Real estate
Real estate
Real estate (Song 81-82.)

Here, the language implies that the ultimate possibility for Ha Young – infinity – is inextricably intertwined with death. She can only become boundless, covering as much real estate as she wants, when her body decomposes into the earth. This constant theme reminds the audience that while Ha Young has traveled thousands of miles away from the haenyeos and is indeed living a privileged existence beyond their imagination, her existence is still precarious under neoliberalism and its ensuing precarity.

Though the playwright is theoretically freer (than the haenyeos) to seek happiness and a dream career, she is still bound by the constraints of neoliberalism, which are explicated through the gentrification of New York and the theatre itself as a gentrifying force. Even though the immigrant playwright has theoretically moved to a place of plenty, she is forced to scabble. Despite being geographically located in a location of immense wealth, neoliberalism has intertwined with the artistic process so that the playwright grapples with the tension of embodying the two. How can she be an artist when her ability to be creative is limited by the representational and material boxes that white people put her in? Both the

haenyeos and Ha Young are desperately searching for prime real estate, as well as all that this psychically invokes, and neither are able to find it. The closest that Ha Young and the haeneyos can get to real estate, both literal and psychic, is quiet existence.

This then, perhaps explains the lack of a resolution in the play, as the ending shows both the possibilities and limitations of resistance to self-commodification. Ha Young is aware of her self-perpetuating process, but can't escape it. The audience is forced to confront the fact that, despite the two very different iterations of neoliberalism in the play, the affective result for both the haenyeos and their descendant is the same. In the final scene of the play, Han Sol advises her yet-to-be-conceived future grandchild, while her grandmother, Ha Young, similarly advises her. This scene juxtaposes the neoliberal conditions in which they're both trapped, as they both tell their grandchildren to make lots of money, buy real estate, and win! (Song 86-87). As the scene comes to a close, the two turn to each other and shift from a conversation about material struggle to one about an internal battle of loss, family, and vanishment. Han Sol acknowledges her inevitable and momentary disappearance and absolves Ha Young of any guilt of abandonment. She promises that even in this abandonment, Ha Young still belongs to her, and she belongs to Ha Young. As the lights begin to fade onstage, Han Sol and Ha Young look out to the audience and one by one, quietly offer, "Let me just exist" (Song 78). This request of simple existence directly contradicts the earlier play within a play, when White Stage Managers proclaimed,

Let me just exist
This is interesting to everyone (Song 76).

Instead, as Han Sol prepares to vanish forever and the characters literally vanish from the audience's eyes, Han Sol and Ha Young don't claim the relevance or universality of their existence. Their simple request to the audience and the audience's ostensibly White Gaze,

seems to imagine a moment of quiet, of being enough and belonging to oneself. But left this way, the audience is forced to consider, how will these characters just exist, and at what cost?

Location, Labor, and Blocking

In this section, I perform a close reading of the mise en scène and creative team's choices for the New York Theatre Workshop production of *Endlings*, which originated in the world premiere at the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) at Harvard University, as they relate to labor and place. In *Endlings*, the audience sees two kinds of labor, manual and theatrical, both of which denote a certain place and thus, a specific identity and status. First, *Endlings* attends to the concrete, everyday labor of haenyeos, or Korean sea women and thus, I argue, *Endlings* creates a theatrical sense of place through this labor. Secondly, *Endlings* presents the theatrical labor of playwriting. *Endlings* also implies the emotional labor required to navigate White Theater institutions, though an analysis of this is outside the scope of this chapter. I pay particular attention towards textual moments that are directorially interpreted in a new or different ways than the text suggests. Sometimes these choices, which are often textually-ambiguous transitional moments, are highlighted by the entire creative team and nuance the text in provocative ways. At other times, these choices undermine the dramaturgical thrust of the piece. By including an analysis of blocking, this project takes a material feminist perspective on the mutually constitutive constructions of place, labor, and identity. I use this framework to insist that attending to haenyeo and playwright labor as it is both discussed and staged reveals these two subjects' particular forms of external and internal exploitation, as well as the shape-shifting qualities required of the laborer under neoliberalism.

I provide a production-specific interrogation of *Endlings*.⁸⁸ This production is particularly worthy of analysis, as it is essentially a re-staging of the world premiere. In both the premiere and this re-staging, the playwright was a part of the rehearsal process, offering insight to the cast and creative team and re-writing the text as was necessary. While the exact extent of Song's labor in the premiere and subsequent production are unknown, she, parallel to Ha Young,

Choreographed onstage labor reveals the ways in which offstage labor shapes internalized landscapes, as blocking encompasses not just physical gesture, but also a psychoanalytic account of the social world. If Pierre Bourdieu's habitus includes "the dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality, or, more simply, of incorporation and objectification," then blocking onstage which is drawn from habitus and is meant to evoke habitus can reveal the psychic internalization of external processes like gentrification (Bourdieu 72). Blocking is, thus, a form of mapping bodies onstage which articulates the internal processes of its creators.

The haenyeo labor, which we first encounter textually, then see, and whose absence we eventually mark, shows the hazards of this kind of labor in a global market. In showing the stakes of haenyeo labor, which are life or death, Song inadvertently compares two other kinds of labor: that of the haenyeos and of the playwright.⁸⁹ Song's *Endlings* provides a

⁸⁸ In this, I am inspired by Karen Shimakawa's writing on Ping Chong's *East-West Quartet*. Shimakawa's analysis of the Asian body remains primarily textual, though it notably also includes a production-specific interrogation of the shifting racial identities which audiences impose onto actors' bodies.

⁸⁹ At certain historical moments, haenyeos were valued for their work, so much so that in a September 1936, the South Korean newspaper *Maeilshinbo* queried, "The *Haenyeo* living in Jeju or the Jeju enlivened by *Haenyeo*?" (Lee and Myong 6). But with South Korea's industrialization, the value of haenyeo work was dismissed.

cultural example of the “repressed contradictions of capital,” revealing the shifting material experiences of haenyeos and their descendants under late stage capitalism, as well as the costs of these experiences (G. Hong 88). Second, Song, who has immigrated twice, first to Canada from South Korean, and then to New York, also writes herself and the work of playwrighting and artistic career-making into *Endlings*. Half-way through *Endlings*, the theatrical world shifts from Jeju Island to Manhattan Island, and the audience encounters the struggles of artistic success through the character of Ha Young. Outside of the labor demonstrated onstage through text, actresses, and design, using a feminist materialist analytic means attending to the circumstances of production; *Endlings* required intensive preparation, both on the part of actresses and designers, as well as craftspeople and stagehands.

In preparation for their roles, actresses Wai Ching Ho (Han Sol), Emily Kuroda (Go Min), and Jo Yang (Sook Ja), trained biweekly to prepare for the underwater sequences in a replication of their labor onstage. These sequences, Kuroda notes, were particularly challenging, as they required the actresses, who are all in their sixties and seventies, to swim underwater, quick change at times, and carry a 15-pound belt (as haenyeos do), and climb up and down ladders (Dilella). In Kuroda’s particular case, the actress did not realize before auditioning and casting that the production would actually include live swimming – which she could not do. Thus, she had to learn how to swim *and* swim effectively onstage as a part of the rehearsal process.⁹⁰ While the actresses and the haenyeos they represent are located differently in terms of power, both groups must physically labor to earn a living.

⁹⁰ Since placing water onstage is particularly costly and dangerous, most stage productions indicate water through moving fabric, lighting, projections, with additional design support in costumes and sound. The 2009 Broadway production of Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, for example, used moving blue fabric and lights to create the illusion of water, and placed many

Watching these older Asian women embody challenging and menial labor onstage provides a complex spectatorial experience. It is thrilling to see these women inhabit a capable, physically strong, and sometimes aggressive stance. But the experience of watching these old aunties push themselves for Off-Broadway theater wages (which are often minimum wage) also provokes the audience into considering the differences (or lack thereof) between the labor of minoritized performers and subsistence farmers.

The onstage swimming also provided additional production responsibilities and challenges for the staff and crew. Technically, the gigantic onstage water tank was 40 feet by 5 feet and was therefore so heavy that could rest in only two places on the NYTW floor without caving through the structural support (Dilella). Additionally, the designers, technical director, craftspeople, and crew needed to maintain the cleanliness of the water tank, heat and recycle the water inside, ensure actors' safety with entering, exiting, and swimming inside, and design and demarcate actor positions for underwater blocking. Finally, the giant water tank also created challenges for technical collaboration, as the creative team had to coordinate lighting and wiring plans. This labor is latent in its appearance, as we never see somebody "turn on" the tank lights. But this obscuring of technical work actually highlights its difficulty, as it is much easier to leave design work messy, and much more challenging to hide wires, sockets, lightbulbs, gels, and various lighting equipment.

Within the production itself, the theatrical labor of the playwright directly contrasts that of the haenyeos to draw attention to workers' precarity within neoliberalism. While Ha Young consistently references her writing, we never watch the actual process onstage in the

of its performers onstage in Heelys wheeled footwear so that they could glide as if swimming.

same way that we see the haenyeos swim, beat fish, or shuck oysters. We see the product of Ha Young's work and experience the conditions in which she works (a mouse jumps onstage). But the fact that, despite its invisibility, her work is at the heart of each of Ha Young's conversations, shows that her sense of self is defined by her work. South Korea's industrialization has led to the diminishment of haenyeo labor and thus, the imminent demise of their identity as workers. Neoliberalism has led the playwright to physically abandon her home and internalize the set of values regarding artistic flexibility and worthiness. Finally, Song underscores audience expectations of whiteness in theatre, emphasizing the ways in which the act of theatrically gazing equates to the act of imposing whiteness. This is not audience labor per se, but rather a confrontation of the audience through revealed labor.

In her characterization of the haenyeos, Song emphasizes their resilience. At times this resilience reads as theatrical effect that dramatizes the severity of the haenyeos' situation. For example, the play's opening moments characterize Go Min, Han Sol, and Sook Ja as the world's last three remaining haenyeos. In Song's world, 96 year old Han Sol is still working (Song 5). While it is medically possible that a 96 year old haenyeo could dive, and authors of various online travel articles claim to have met haenyeos in their mid-nineties, academic research has not corroborated this find. While *Endlings* may lean into the theatricality of the world for the dramatic effect, the text still underscores the haenyeos' labor.

In the first moment that we meet the Voice, before she even introduces the haenyeos by name, the Voice introduces the haenyeos by explaining what they do. Through a carnival-esque repetition, she beats out,

They can dive over 65 feet deep without any equipment
They can dive up to 46 times every hour
They work around 4 to 8 hours a day without a break (Song 15).

The Voice goes on to articulate the haenyeos' decompression sickness, highlight the haenyeo body as "an exceptional diving machine," and note that haenyeos can withstand lower temperatures. Then Song continues the linguistic tactic of repetition to build the resilience and fortitude of these women, as the Voice says,

They dive like this every day, all year
Even on national holidays
Even in winter
Even while pregnant (Song 18).

Aside from the increasing drama of these circumstances, this internal rhyme, building from "every" into "even / even / even," sonically underscores the relentless nature of the haenyeos' labor. The haenyeos also repeat themselves through physical gesture, as Go Min takes an initial handful of pills to combat decompression sickness, and then several lines later, takes another.⁹¹ After the women dive, even as they mourn the loss of their youth and complain their imminent death, the audience sees the haenyeos' physical resilience. First Go Min doesn't recognize that her hand is freely bleeding. Then, once Han Sol points out her wound, Go Min washes it in the ocean, ignoring any saltwater sting. Immediately she responds to Han Sol, saying, "You cut yourself... on your cheek," and as Han Sol replies, "You bruised yourself," they begin batting wounds back and forth (Song 21).

This tonal oscillation, vacillating between brusque retorts and joke complaints, is the emotional spectrum upon which the haenyeos constantly slide. Jokes drive the haenyeos, provide impetus for continuing work, and serve to casually reveal the intimate experience of haeneyo life. While the Voice may dramatize and even romanticize the haenyeos' abilities,

⁹¹ In Sammi Cannold's premiere A.R.T. staging of *Endlings*, Emily Kuroda does not follow these stage directions. Nonetheless, they are in Song's published text, intimating their importance.

the trio brushes aside their work wounds. This dearth of self-pity grounds the audience in the material reality of haenyeo experience, which is made up of cold-water diving, net-mending, and television watching. This tonal drift keeps the audience on edge; we are never sure how seriously we are meant to take these women, so it's unclear whether it might be socially acceptable to laugh at Go Min's comparison of catching a fish so large that it slaps her around: "And then I thought, well, that reminds me of my dead husband" (Song 22). Keeping the audience unsurely footed encourages their constant intellectual engagement; this continuous switch between entertainment and reason is akin to Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, or the Alienation effect.⁹² As the play continues, the material reality of these women's lives vacillates on another spectrum: between theatrical spectacle and death.

In addition to Song's script, the premiere A.R.T. and NYTW co-productions also emphasized the actresses' athletic labor through three interludes of haenyeos swimming onstage. The first takes place approximately a third of the way through the play. The audience has already seen the actresses jump behind a set piece and splash water, but it's unclear exactly what is behind this set piece; it could be rocks, a hidden staircase, or an unpaid intern waiting with a spraying water bottle as the actresses mimic a downward dive. Instead, as the stage lights dim, fog wafts in on a stormy sea, Go Min and Han Sol each admonish Sook Ja not to get greedy, and what resembles the sounds of a Buk drum intertwine with tinkling piano music, panels in this set piece intermittently roll down and showcase the various haenyeos in their underwater labors (*Endlings* 37:30). Each of them is

⁹² Brecht states, "They [the characters] ought to be presented quite coldly, classically, and objectively. For they are not matter for empathy; they are to be understood. Feelings are private and limited. Against that the reason is fairly comprehensive and to be relied on" (15). But simultaneously, Brecht expects that audiences spectate theatre for entertainment.

variously spot lit, their old-fashioned spot-light masks and orange suits twinkling in the blue water as they dexterously swim several strokes, pry off an abalone with a knife, and hold their breath while searching amongst seaweed. In this underwater world, these 96, 83, and 78 year old women look capable and luminous, even as they work.

The second underwater sequence follows Sook Ja's death. Before the haenyeos dive, they note that the weather is against them: "it's gonna be a war today" with the wind and the waves (30). As Han Sol and Go Min clean the days' catch, they recall previous haenyeo deaths, only to realize that Sook Ja's dive is taking too long.⁹³ They drag an unconscious Sook Ja to the surface and by aggressively rocking her with lots of "swift and firm slaps to the back," and a lot of cursing, push Sook Ja to spit up a stream of water. She laughingly and depreciatingly shares her underwater, near-death hallucination, and then, while Han Sol and Go Min dive again to "make up for [her] work," she closes her eyes and listens to the sounds of the ocean, asks,

Who will inherit my life?
No one, I hope
I wouldn't wish it on anyone (Song 50).

Sook Ja falls face first into the sand and dies. The boat refuses to come to Jeju due because of the inclement weather, so Go Min takes Sook Ja's body home and in the ensuing underwater transition, we move from Jeju to Manhattan. Song's text seems to intend that this moment be both desolate and quietly transformative. She writes,

They [Han Sol and Go Min] put their diving suits on
It's a beautiful day
HAN SOL leaves the stroller behind and dives
She transcends gravity and within moments becomes a mermaid
GO MIN dives in too

⁹³ These include a shark attack, a whirlpool, and slipping on a rock.

They disappear into the water

There is nothing on the beach but the stroller
The sound of the ocean wind
The breaking of the waves
The sound of a car honking?
The sound of the city is heard faintly
And then

Out of nowhere
We are in M A N H A T T A N (Song 60).

Here, the audience sees Han Sol become something otherworldly through diving; her labor is highlighted as that which transforms her. Her transmutation coexists with the gritty barrenness of Jeju Island, which in turn becomes another gritty island and the transition as it is written confronts the audience with the cost of this move. But the transition as it is staged and designed is more ambivalent.

In this second underwater segment, the audience first sees Han Sol and Go Min dive in their individual panels (*Endlings* 59:35). Then the tank's lights fade as the playwright and narrator, Ha Young walks in front of the audience with a script, gestures vaguely into the distance, and a plethora of White Male Stage Managers dressed in black walk on to remove the set trappings of Jeju Island.⁹⁴ As they walk off leaving a blank stage, all the water tank panels simultaneously peel away and the audience sees a spectacularly ambitious 4100 gallons of water glow onstage (Dilella). While, according to the text, Han Sol "transcends gravity" and "becomes a mermaid" before "disappearing into the water," in this production, the mermaid is interpreted as a gigantic, turtle-esque creature with an orange eye who undulates underwater to Wes Anderson-esque music (Song 49). As the creature reaches the

⁹⁴ I refer to them in this way because Song explicitly details that the characters of Stage Managers "should be played by the production's actual white male stagehands" (2).

far end of the tank, the eight white male stage managers re-enter, traversing the stage to set a tiny white modular NY skyline and black couch onstage, before all the tank's panels simultaneously zip up, and the watery haenyeo world disappears.

As it's staged in the A.R.T. premiere, this second underwater segment both expands the audience's understanding of labor and undercuts the grim nature of haenyeos' world. Prior to this transition, theatrical action has clarified the stakes of haenyeo work, first textually through Go Min and Han Sol's joking reminisces of haenyeo deaths and then literally through Sook Ja's passing. This second underwater segment doesn't showcase the work of the haenyeos, but it does highlight the labor of the designers and technical staff by revealing a grandiose nature of this design and marking the actual work of stagecraft. The audience sees both the material existence of something seemingly theatrically impossible, a gigantic underwater world onstage, and the metaphor of something theoretically impossible, a transition from Jeju Island to Manhattan Island. As such, the set change becomes more than hidden labor; it becomes theatrically magical. This set change is also the first time the audience sees Ha Young with a script, adding to the audience's awareness of this heightened theatricality. As Ha Young initiates this set change with a script in her hands, the acting makes clear the theatrical labor required in transitioning a play from the page to a lived experience. In other words, the audience sees the work that literally enables Song's imagination to take form onstage. And yet the staging and design of this underwater sequence and set changeover also serve to undercut the work of the haenyeos precisely *because* of their spectacle.

Rather than encourage the audience to mourn Sook Ja or to reflect on the cost of her work, this transition's tone makes the moment visually spectacular and what is more easily

interpreted as tonally childish. On one hand, from an artistic perspective, it is understandable why a director and design team would make this choice. By lightening the mood through showing something playful, the audience is more primed for laughter in the next scene, which is intended to be humorous and also a critique of race relations in the theatre. Yet dramaturgically, the creative team lets the audience disassociate from the grief of Sook Ja's death.

Instead of evaluating the cost of transnational movement, the creative team turns an elegant theatrical metaphor into a magical ethnic moment.⁹⁵ In the published version of the play, the stage directions indicate that Sook Ja floats across the sea slowly along with a massive turtle. The two perform "a beautiful ballet routine of sorts" (Song 80). For Sook Ja, this moment is transportive, perhaps even healing. Rather than tithe her leg (as her dream foresees), the turtle and Sook Ja gently drift together.⁹⁶ This, perhaps, is the closest Sook Ja gets to release – a moment to step away from an endless treadmill. She's tired of working so hard: "I don't want to swim anymore anyway." And as Berlant reminds us, the struggle to achieve the good life does not allow "any place for a subject to rest" (18). Thus, Sook Ja's fantasy inherently holds repose, pause, calm. But the turtle costume and glowing tank, in combination with effervescent chimes, run contrary to this impulse. Instead, in combination,

⁹⁵ Spike Lee's "Magical Negro" refers to the trope of a black stock character whose support enables a white protagonist's transformation and learning.

⁹⁶ Sook Ja shares her dream: "... And I have no money to pay you to have him again
But is there any other way?
The turtle said that it's okay
He had no interest in money
The turtle just asked for my leg
So I gave him my leg
I didn't think twice
Because what do I need my leg for?" (49).

this interlude leads the audience to infantilize the haenyeo. I critique this moment, acknowledging that possibility that as an audience member, this interpretation may upend the creative team's intentions (Kondo 41). But while it is impossible to predict the reception of a play, critical analysis still provides a method for thinking through how the problems of this moment might be addressed, so as to remake our worlds (Kondo 44).

The mise en scene of this moment between Sook Ja and the turtle is significant because it contradicts the play's (and the production's) larger argument: rather than propose a release from the commodification of self, this moment encourages the audience to commodify Sook Ja. If the creative team wanted to lean into the absurdity of the moment and play the opposite of the notion of rest, they could encourage the salt-of-the-earth humor that the haenyeos inhabit, even with the turtle costume. And yet, set to twinkling background music and soft, colorful lighting, it's all too easy to forget the circumstances of Sook Ja's death. We, the audience, slide from magical to passive as we take in the ornamental beauty in front of us. The labor that led to Sook Ja's death, the haenyeos, and the play's diasporic movement are diminished and tokenized. When this infantilization occurs, swimming (or diving) is no longer seen as work. While this moment could be a release of sorts for Sook Ja, the beauty of its framing also simplifies the work that she's done. Sook Ja might be "free," but in this tableau, she also seems to be playing a character, not herself. As Kondo states, "the narrative strategies of naturalism/realism... are implicated in the reproduction of power" (Kondo 44). But the narrative strategies of magical realism are implicated too.

In the following section I continue this inquiry into audience reception. Here, I focus on a review of *Endlings* that fundamentally, I argue, misunderstands the subjecthood of the

haenyeos, the disjointed dramatic structure that Song engages, and the audience labor that this play asks us to perform.

Critic and Audience Labor

In the following section, I argue against Jesse Green's review of *Endlings*, analyzing the ways in which it represents the United States' theatre's continued centering of white supremacy and neoliberalism. At issue here is not Green himself or his appointment; I am less interested in Green's specific review itself and more invested in the ways in which Green's review operates as a microcosm of the history of theatrical racism and commodification which *Endlings* critiques, and the ways in which this review misunderstands the labor that *Endlings* invites the audience to deliver.

In his review, Green questions the veracity of the haenyeos' world, enmeshing his critique within a Western framework of (racialized) neoliberalism. Green terms Han Sol's love of Hollywood as "improbable" and the haenyeos' point of view as "self-abnegation."⁹⁷ Why is it so easy for Green (and Markelov) to see the haenyeos as subjects with little agency, who are unable to claim their desires? Here, Green inadvertently re-enacts Fanon's articulation of white colonialism, in which the black man "must be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon 110). Unable to conceive of an ontological existence outside of his framework, Green demands that Asian diasporic identity be constructed in relation to white understandings of authenticity. This demand illuminates the "problematic assumptions that

⁹⁷ I also take issue with his terming the structure of *Endlings* as "incomplete"; Green writes that the playwright in Manhattan and the haenyeos "unfortunately feel like separate works, both worthy but neither complete." But Green does not offer a definition for a "complete" structure, and this interpretation misses the intentionality of intercultural tensions in Song's work.

‘underlie’ our tacit aesthetic and theoretical common sense” (Kondo 44). In this moment, the review reveals the unwitting racialization and Eurocentricity that undergirds a discourse of universal truth.⁹⁸

Green is unable to see the humor in Song’s satire of New York theatre; thus, he misses the possibility that she is mocking the expectation that her work is considered in relation to whiteness. Instead, he is particularly critical of Song’s interrogation of theatrical whiteness, arguing that the “white play” is “so deliberately bad that its satire sails right past whatever mark it was meant to hit.” When Green questions whether Song is mocking her avowed theatrical pantheon of heroes or mocking her work “as unworthy of theirs,” he doesn’t recognize her indictment of White Theater expectations.⁹⁹ While he correctly diagnoses that the play spirals into surrealism, he, again, does not consider why *Endlings* makes such a move. I assert that while Song’s juggling of these two worlds and the play’s turn into surrealism might give the audience “a bad case of the dramaturgical bends,” this experience is precisely the point. Negotiating minoritarian racial identity within theatre and neoliberalism *creates* a case of the bends within the minoritized individual. Jolting between the dialectic of self and the world engenders an experience of nausea, similar to Fanon’s double consciousness (Fanon 111). If race and gender permeate aesthetic form, Song intervenes by highlighting the minoritized subject’s experience of a racialized neoliberal gaze and then extending this experience to the audience (Kondo 44).

⁹⁸ Kondo references “universality” (Kondo 45). I apply this idea more specifically to Green’s review; hence, the notion of universal truth.

⁹⁹ Elsewhere, Song shares that her favorite theatrical “boyfriends,” as she once called them, include Brecht, Beckett, Albee, and Shawn (Simon).

Green does not recognize that Song refuses to neatly package both the playwright's and the haenyeos' experiences within a framework where their trauma is easily digestible, as this would impose the racialized neoliberal gaze upon the playwright and the haenyeos.¹⁰⁰ Instead, the work of the play is to make the audience labor to understand this trauma. By questioning the authenticity of the haenyeos' world and perspective, Green ignores the very real reach of Western media and neoliberalism, opting instead to perpetuate reductive expectations of what contemporary Asian diasporic women's desires and traumas might look like.¹⁰¹ Why, according to Green, do women whose daily existence teeters into death, need to laud themselves to be real? Perhaps his "historico-racial schema" has been unduly sketched out of stories, ephemera, and narratives, rather than lived experience (Fanon 111). Instead of questioning the haenyeos' authenticity, a better question would be to inquire what about Song's work bypasses the possibility of a "real and wrenching conflict" of experiencing "identity as commodity" for him? Why does this then turn instead into "the young playwright's self-absorption?" Song refuses to adhere to Green's racialized neoliberal expectations of consumable ethnic people and instead, writes the haenyeos into existence to argue for their value despite unruliness. She refuses to be made simultaneously responsible for her body, her race, and her ancestors (Fanon 112). In doing so, she refuses objectification

¹⁰⁰ Perhaps Green is loathe to see this because the impact of his own whiteness is being interrogated.

¹⁰¹ Green's expectations bring to mind a curated, contemporary version of racist anthropological work of the early twentieth century, like Bronisław Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. While Green is a reviewer and not a scholar, outside of academic scholarship, artistic works like MacArthur Genius winner, Joshua Oppenheimer's narrative documentaries, *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* also detail the proliferation of Western media in international countries, as well as its effects.

which might lead to consumption within the neoliberal gaze. Green's analysis, unfortunately, does not.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyze Celine Song's *Endlings* to articulate the commodification of the self as a neoliberal affect, which then shapes identity formation and expectations of labor. To do this, I trace the ways in which labor onstage and offstage reveals both the psychic and lived experience of this commodification. After summarizing the play, I historically contextualize the haenyeos as neoliberal subjects from the historical conditions that led to their inception to their status as vanishing, contemporary South Korean subjects.

I place *Endlings* within theoretical inquiries of the neoliberal conceit of "the good life," and trouble the ways in which this conceit intercepts with Asian diasporic identity, specifically the framework of the model minority. In bringing together Lauren Berlant, Cathy Park Hong, Dorinne Kondo, David Palumbo-Liu, and other theorists, I argue that minoritarian subjects vacillate between commodifying their identities and commodifying their labor force, and that Asian diasporic subjects are particularly subject to both this self-commodification and overwork. Berlant's fantasy remains, and theatrical success (and theatrical institutional recognition) are a manifestation of the good life.

I delve into *Endlings* to argue that Theater (and its associated arms) perpetuates neoliberal relations. Simultaneously, *Endlings* also critiques the model minority myth, attempts to achieve the good life, and perpetual, flexible, all-encompassing work that goes into this. Both the haenyeos and Ha Young experience the desire for real estate literally, metaphorically, and affectively. But in contrast to Ha Young, who Song shows as experiencing neoliberalism predominantly through her relationship with Theatre, the

haenyeos primarily experience neoliberalism through the perpetual nature of their labor and the voice's ethnographic distancing of them, which is also reflective of their UNESCO designation. I argue that the ending of the play shows both the possibilities and limitations of resistance to self-commodification, as we, the audience, grapple with the fact that both the haenyeos and Ha Young experience the same affect, despite their different lived experiences of neoliberalism.

In the following section, I read the onstage and offstage labor of *Endlings*, as onstage labor illuminates the ways in which offstage labor shapes internalized landscapes. To do this, I trace the actresses' preparation for their work (and swimming) onstage, and note the technical work required to support this onstage labor. I then read the underwater sequences, ultimately critiquing the final sequence, as I argue that it undermines the very highlighting of labor which has heretofore been Song's intervention. In creating a magical ethnic moment, I argue that production ignores the very real labor of the haenyeos and the stakes of life and death that neoliberalism imposes onto them. Instead, we slide into a passive gaze which ornamentizes the haenyeos.¹⁰²

Finally, I critique Green's NYT review; I see its interpretation of the veracity of haenyeo representation and disjointed dramatic structure as fundamentally misunderstanding both the racial subjecthood of these characters and misinterpreting Song's structure as a critique of White Theatre. Sadly, Green's review ultimately perpetuates a racialized neoliberal gaze, mistaking this disjuncture as an error, rather than Song's intervention into

¹⁰² This is a reference to Anne Anlin Cheng's *Ornamentalism*, which I detail in the first chapter.

the racialized neoliberal gaze and an invitation for the audience to grapple with the labor of this disjuncture.

In the next chapter, I pick up these same questions of labor onstage, this time through the lens of *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord (KWSO)*. I trace the neoliberal conditions (namely, the pandemic and a lack of government support) that led to the work which inspired this piece. I then use *KWSO* to articulate feminist care practices that may, perhaps, hopefully, destabilize neoliberal values of individualism and isolation.

Chapter Three: **Sweatshop Overlord: Performing Care as Neoliberal Resistance**

In March 2020, as Covid-19 (Covid) shutdowns sweep the United States, comedian and performance artist Kristina Wong begins to panic. All gigs and their accompanying payment have been cancelled for the foreseeable future, a global pandemic is wreaking havoc, and the U.S. government is frozen in crisis. As an Asian woman (third generation Chinese), Wong is afraid to publicly show her face in case it incites violence. But in a world before mask mandates, she's also afraid to mask up, as it underlines the possibility that her presence equates to a possible threat. In the midst of this panic and pandemic, Wong realizes that she has an essential skill; she can sew. She volunteers to sew for those without masks, and as requests begin to pour in, she starts the "Auntie Sewing Squad," a self-termed mutual aid group whose practices can be described as "care."

The Auntie Sewing Squad begins with a small group of volunteer sewers (Wong's mother's friends), but it eventually becomes a wide-spread network with hundreds of Aunties coordinating resources, connections, and care across communities and even states. Requests pour in from emergency responders in New York, healthcare workers in hospitals, the Navajo nation, undocumented migrant farmworkers, and more. Aunties begin to coordinate care beyond mask sewing: meals are paid for and then sent to sewers, Aunties' relatives drive trucks of coats (and masks) to communities in need, and hand sanitizer is smuggled to social workers who have run out. A year and a half after it begins, in September 2021, the "Auntie Sewing Squad," or ASS, as Wong jokingly to call it, retires. Finally, at this point, masks are widely available to all who need them. But first, Auntie Sewing Squad becomes an international example of creative care that centers the needs of those most marginalized.

Feminist care ethic is a framework that centers care-taking (as opposed to notions of rationality) at the center of morality. Feminist care, then, is the series of practices and tactics that emerge from this moral impetus.

In ensuing sections, I address the historical tradition of feminist care ethic. As I discuss scholarly work which specifically engages this term, I maintain the term “feminist care.” However, the subjects that Wong addresses (as audience) and explicates (as Aunties and recipients) do not necessarily adhere to a gender binary. Instead, she notes, many specifically trouble binary gender roles and embrace gender non-binary and/or fluid identities and discourse. Therefore, I see Wong expanding the definition of care beyond an androcentric history; the work that *Sweatshop Overlord* does via Wong is not exclusive to feminist care. In other words, I frame Wong’s work as taking “feminist care” as a point of departure. Therefore, I transition to considering these relations as “care” (rather than “feminist care”), when placing them in conversation with *Sweatshop Overlord*. Ultimately, I see this as a linguistic intervention which supports Wong’s expansion of care beyond its traditional applications.

Since its inception, the Auntie Sewing Squad has received much national acclaim. Media sources such as The Laura Flanders Show on American Public Television and The Guardian, have been eager to spotlight a positive example of action against Covid. Academic and public scholars, including Sean Metzger and Rebeca Solnit, have been quick to celebrate Auntie Sewing Squad’s work (“The Power of Art & Aunties”; Solnit; “I Teach the Audience”). The University of California Press published a book written by Auntie Sewing Squad participants, which is now available from a variety of nation-wide retailers, including Target (Hong, Mai-Linh K. et al). In short, Auntie Sewing Squad has been much lauded in

public discourse. However, *Sweatshop Overlord* (2021), Wong's accompanying piece, has received little scholarly attention, despite its New York Theatre Workshop production received many accolades, including its selection as a New York Times Critic Pick and 2022 Pulitzer Prize Finalist ("Our Sewing Superhero"; "Finalist: Kristina Wong").

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which *Sweatshop Overlord* operates as both a performance piece and a feminist intervention.¹⁰³ As a performance artist, Wong's work draws on her lived experiences and is always political, often centering Asian women and their concerns. Two of her previous works, for example, include *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Kristina Wong for Public Office*. Both pieces comedically incorporate her life, her observations, and research on the respective high rates of depression and suicide among Asian American women and the politics of organizing her fellow representatives against the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) during her term as elected representative of Wilshire Center Koreatown Sub-district 5 Neighborhood Council. Just as *Kristina Wong for Public Office* draws upon Wong's past, so does *Sweatshop Overlord*.

Sweatshop Overlord tracks the challenges and successes of Auntie Sewing Squad, alongside Wong's emotional journey navigating the pandemic at large. But *Sweatshop Overlord* also uses its three acts (Act One, We Have Been Called to Fight for the Country; Act Two, We Are Now at War With the Government; and Act Three, Reopening) to take audiences through the simultaneous oppressions of neoliberalism, anti-Asian violence, and

¹⁰³ The New York Times review embraced the show as "a debriefing after the crisis we have endured," deeming it a Critic's Pick ("Our Sewing Superhero"); Time Out gave it four stars out of five, terming it "haute couture," if also "a bit lopsided" (Snook); and Theatre Mania characterized Wong as carrying "much of this 90-minute show with the sheer force of her personality" (Stewart). This latter critic also calls her like "a human cartoon, both elastic and ecstatic" – a questionable if not concerning choice, even when couched within admiration (which this seems to be).

fake information. With all of these, Wong raises questions of responsibility, care, and need: what is her role, our role, the government's role in responding to Covid-19, and its exacerbation of intertwining oppressions?

In *Sweatshop Overlord*, Wong personally veers between rage, surprise, self-deprecation, hope, hilarity, self-questioning, gratitude amidst other emotions: in short, she races through the kaleidoscope gamut of human experience in 90 minutes, much of it offered with her signature humor. She is quippy, warm, and sometimes confrontational as she offers lines like, "Listen, I get it. When the entire world is panicking about dropping dead... it's not a good time to demand: "Will somebody please-- think of the actors?!" (Wong 3).¹⁰⁴ This quip is emblematic of the ways in which Wong uses performance as a form of (humorous) feminist care.

In this chapter, I argue that *Sweatshop Overlord* expands feminist care ethic. Feminist care practices, known as "feminist care" (and the ethos of which is often referred to as feminist care ethic), are practices rooted in combatting injustices driven by patriarchy. Historically, this ethic was originally defined in terms of women's identity and women's morality. Writers often applied an idealized mother/child approach to care, or focused on intimate, familial relations. As more recent scholars have taken up care, researchers have contested the idea that feminist care stems exclusively from women and begun to push beyond a familial framework. "Care" has been applied to studies in the judicial system, the medical field, agricultural practices, and other research areas. However, performance scholars have yet to meaningfully take up this framework. While the Auntie Sewing Squad

¹⁰⁴ For clarity, future quotes are cited from Wong's 11.7.2021 production draft, and visual readings reference the private recording.

embodied practices of care, this chapter does not provide a sociological examination upon this topic.

Instead, as a performance scholar, I approach care ethic through a theatrical lens. Thus, though discussions of Auntie Sewing Squad are intertwined with my analysis, in this chapter, I focus on the ways in which *Sweatshop Overlord*, as a performance, illuminates, embodies, and expands care modalities, values. Ultimately, I argue, this expansion of care's definition presents the application of care, and performances of care, as avenues of resistance to neoliberalism.

Sweatshop Labor: Garment Worker Experiences, Neoliberal Trade Influences, and Continued Exploitation

In this section, I contextualize Kristina Wong's *Sweatshop Overlord* within the history of garment labor. Because *Sweatshop Overlord* focuses on a network initially built in California (first in San Francisco amongst Wong's mother's friends and then based out of Los Angeles, where Wong lives), this context does, too. However, I also note the ways in which this network operates on a wider scale around the Transpacific, as histories of bodies, sewing knowledge, and now garment pieces, flow around the Transpacific, as well. Similarly, because women's involvement in garment labor predominantly begins with the mid-20th century, this chapter focuses on this timeline. As Covid demonstrates, and as Wong's work shows, garment labor in the United States is a reflection of the consistent undervaluing of women's health, labor, time, and relational care under neoliberal economic models, as well histories of immigrant movement.

Asian diasporic (predominantly Chinese) female garment workers have historically fought for their rights, even as they have been exploited. While *Sweatshop Overlord* does not organize for sweatshop workers' rights, their history and advocacy is the lineage of Wong's play. Because of immigration legislation, consumer demand, and access to labor organizing, garment work mostly excluded Chinese women until the mid 1930s. While originally, after the Gold Rush, Chinese men and their craft guilds dominated the industry, by the 1930s, women operators were increasingly hired because they were willing to work for less money (Dygert and Shibata 65). As the garment industry grew from the 1920s to the 1940s, craft guilds failed, and Chinese men began joining sweatshops ("Work, Immigration, Gender" 42). Chinese female garment workers began to join unions in the 1930s, finding success in union organizing.¹⁰⁵ But the real turn to women's labor began after the 1947 modification of the Magnuson Act, which permitted Chinese wives and children to enter as non-quota immigrants, and the immigration reform in 1965, which abolished Asian national origin quotas ("Work, Immigration, Gender" 42).

While garment workers in the mid-twentieth century initially seemed to have their rights entrenched, shifting immigration policies and neoliberal economic policies in the last quarter of century eroded these rights. In the 1950s and 1960s, sweatshop conditions in the United States momentarily disappeared.¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, these wages, conditions, and strong unions, did not last, in part due to the changing demographics of immigration.

¹⁰⁵ For example, Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers Union successfully organized for a pay raise, overtime and a Labor Day paid holiday against their employer, National Dollar Store (Adachi and Lo 54).

¹⁰⁶ After World War II, women, as well as men, earned relatively good wages and had reasonably good working conditions, largely due to aggressive union organizing and labor management co-operation (Rosen 4).

Additionally, the United States was also beginning to invest in other countries' textile industries.¹⁰⁷ Nationally, the 1965 Immigration Act passed, with dual goals of family reunification and recruiting workers with special job skills; the resulting wave of immigrants was primarily women. Immigration reform created opportunities for many Asian women to finally immigrate across the Pacific, but even after they arrived, many of these women struggled to find work. Thus, the influx of immigrants after 1965 created a new wave of contractors, invigorating garment industry, and setting the stakes for new sweatshop conditions in the United States.¹⁰⁸

As unions struggled to maintain influence in the 1980s in the face of expanding neoliberal legislation, Chinese female constituents organized to make unions better meet their needs. For example, almost every New York Chinatown garment worker was a part of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), Local 23-25. While this chapter's membership was almost 80% Chinese, the meetings and union literature weren't translated into Chinese, until the women protested (Quan 80). Cultural barriers existed (many Chinese women didn't understand that they had a right to have their voices heard and vote), but their participation grew as organizing became more frequent and sometimes successfully supported their rights.

¹⁰⁷ During the (official) post-war occupation of Japan, America re-built Japan's textile industry (Rosen 27). The United States also financially supported South Korea and Taiwan's post-war industrial revitalization (as well as their military defense) and other, formerly colonial nations including Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore, largely, Rosen argues, in an attempt to link these nations to Western-dominated networks of free trade and investment (43).

¹⁰⁸ I say San Francisco Bay Area because the garment industry was based in San Francisco in the 1800s and first half of twentieth century, but was eventually priced out into the East Bay and beyond, as I detail later on.

By the end of the twentieth century, Asian immigrant women made up much of the vast majority garment worker population in California, where garment work was concentrated, and the domestic supply chain ensured these women's exploitation.¹⁰⁹ Los Angeles' garment workers were mainly Mexican and Asian (China, Vietnam, Korea, Thailand, Cambodia) immigrants; San Francisco's were almost entirely Chinese with a small number of other Asians (Loucky et al. 345, quoted by Espiritu, "Gender and Labor" 639).¹¹⁰ The owners of these sweatshops were often Asian, themselves Transpacific immigrants, perhaps because the initial investment for opening a shop is low; sweatshop owners don't need to buy materials, sell garments, make designs, or cut cloth. The fact that Asian immigrants were willing to exploit other community members speaks to the neoliberal conditions in which they found themselves scrambling to survive.

Within neoliberal working conditions, in the late twentieth century, sweatshop labor operated as a pyramid scheme, keeping large numbers of garment workers at the bottom. Retailers set prices and styles and purchased clothing from the manufacturer. Manufacturers designed clothing, registered product lines, purchased fabric, and subcontracted to contractors. Contractors received orders and sometimes subcontracted this work to other contractors with individual cutters, trimmers, pressers, dyers, and seamstresses.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ The three biggest U.S. cities for the garment industry were Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco. However, as I previously declared, this chapter focuses on Californian cities.

¹¹⁰ By 2001, Miriam Ching Yoon Louie notes that the changing demographics: "Latina/os represent 60 percent and Asians 35 percent of workers in all garment factories in the United States which the government classifies as sweatshops" ("Migrating from Exploitation" 25).

¹¹¹ Scholars debate the exact levels of this pyramid scheme. Some (Adachi and Lo) use the terms "contractors" and "subcontractors" whereas others use the term "jobbers": these "purchase materials, give cut and uncut pieces to contractors, and tell contractors where to ship finished products" and exist between contractors and manufacturers" ("Immigrant Asian Women" 8).

Garment workers experienced exploitation in a multiplicity of ways, which continue to this day (as Wong notes). Common violations include violations of minimum wage laws, cash pay, child labor, overtime pay, and failure to provide breaks. The competition for contractors to secure work was highly competitive, and contractors often lowered wages in order to lower their costs (Dygert and Shibata 64). In 1973, the California Division of Industrial Welfare investigated 92 garment shops in San Francisco-Oakland; the Division found 601 violations of the wage and hour law. Only one shop was free of violations (Dygart and Shibata 68). In 2000, the annual back wages owed because of illegal practices was estimated at more than \$70 million, or over \$119 million when adjusted for current inflation (Bonacich, quoted by Burgel et al. 466). In 2003, sewing machine operators in California earned 19% less than the U.S. poverty guidelines (Bishaw, quoted by Burgel et al. 469). As of May 2021, the median annual wage for garment workers in the United States was \$29,750, but this wage included workers in the Federal Executive Branch, Management of Companies and Enterprises, Motor Vehicle Parts Manufacturing, as well as other sectors, thereby skewing these statistics away from the reality of apparel mills (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). These statistics offer an official point of view, but it is important to note that surveys and studies by community organizations and non-government entities also paint a bleak picture – one that is perhaps slightly more revealing, given language barriers and immigrant workers’ cautious response to government inquiry.¹¹²

¹¹² The community organization, Asian Immigrant Women Advocates surveyed 166 seamstresses in 1992, and found that 57% of the women worked 6-7 days a week, a third were paid less than minimum wage, half were paid the minimum wage, 27% were paid by the piece, 85% were without paid sick leave, and 80% had no workers compensation, which was legally required, or were unaware of it if they did (“Immigrant Asian Women” 9). One group of surveyors, in 2004, found that “clinic clients earned less than two thirds the [then]

Many garment workers experience the “triple burden” of garment work, domestic labor, and additional work at home, though this triple burden does not address the emotional impacts of garment work. Moreover, while Covid exposed the fact that women are disproportionately responsible for home and childcare labor, garment workers have long lived this experience, melding the responsibilities of garment work into their domestic caretaking. “Homework,” as it’s termed, is when seamstresses take cut pieces home, take on the cost of electricity and utilities used to produce the clothes, and return to work with finished garments (“Immigrant Asian Women” 8). Homework may be done by the garment workers, but it is also sometimes done by children, nieces and nephews, or others in the domestic sphere. In 2004, Frank Conte, District Director of the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment Standards Administration, Wage and Hour Division, guessed that 30% of garments produced in the United States were homework.¹¹³

Garment workers not only experience exploitation in terms of their wages and leave, but the work itself is physically straining, and sweatshop environments are detrimental to workers’ health. The industry demands that workers operate at an extremely high speed and utilize physical tension when sewing; garment work requires highly repetitious, sustained, and awkward postures (Burgel et al. 465). As United States sweatshops navigated transnational trade agreements in the turn to the twenty-first century, California sweatshops developed a niche focus on “extremely fast turnaround, small orders, and frequent changes in assembly lines” (Burgel et al. 466). This focus was indicative of neoliberal demands on

current \$9.58 living wage for Oakland – far less than the mean wages of \$17.64 for all Oakland residents” (Burgel et al 469).

¹¹³ Conte shares the difficulty of approximating this number, as much homework is paid under the table in cash (“Immigrant Asian Women” 8).

workers' flexibility, and also increased the physical demands of the job. At the Asian Immigrant Women Workers Clinic in the Bay Area, medical professionals and medical students found that, of the immigrant, female, and monolingual Cantonese population they served, 48% had difficulty breathing because of fabric dust and 99% had musculoskeletal pain (Burgel et al. 470). Upsettingly, 99% of the workers treated at the Clinic had injuries that would have been covered by workers' compensation (Burgel et al. 472). One study, by Chalsa Loo and Paul Ong, asked female garment workers if they were proud of their kind of work; 72% were not ("Immigrant Asian Women" 10). In another, many women indicated a high level of stress due to their bosses consistent yelling – to say nothing of the work itself (Burgel et al. 479). While these statistics show that sweatshop contractors have denied and continue to garment workers' rights in a multiplicity of ways, the "savings" resulting from this exploitation were not enough to keep sweatshops in the United States.

Neoliberal trade agreements at the end of the twentieth century pushed most domestic garment labor abroad and decreased working conditions in the United States.¹¹⁴ With its policies of free trade, the Reagan administration (1981-1989) created new market agreements for apparel in Latin America, setting a path of transnational labor for future administrations and the garment industry at large.¹¹⁵ Companies shut down their domestic factories as they discovered that labor outside of California was approximately 50% cheaper and labor

¹¹⁴ Despite the initial strength of garment unions, wages, and working conditions after World War II, by the end of the twentieth century, garment unions (akin to most U.S. unions) had lost most of their power, working conditions had dramatically worsened, and the garment industry had lost almost half its jobs (Rosen 4).

¹¹⁵ Bush and Clinton built on Reagan's legacy with agreements including the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, which created a "free trade zone" among the United States, Mexico, and Canada, and the 1998 U.S.– Cambodia Trade Agreement on Textiles and Apparel, which linked market access (increasing quota) to labor standards (Ear 93).

overseas could be up to 98% cheaper.¹¹⁶ The companies that did keep part of their labor in the United States, decreased work conditions. In other words, free trade agreements in the 1980s and 1990s led to the “re-discovery” of sweatshop conditions in the U.S., as well as the “discovery” of these conditions abroad (Rosen 7).

When garment labor moved abroad, an equivalent amount of capital did not follow it, but workers’ exploitation did. New U.S. tax legislation legally ensured that profits were repatriated (to the United States). These profits were significant, as companies were required to pay tariffs on only the “value added” to garments sewn overseas.¹¹⁷ Thus, the product costs for U.S. based and multi-national companies were cut, which further eroded workers’ leverage. Moreover, moving labor abroad also led to money moving differently; “according to a non-governmental organization representative interviewed in 2008, the garment industry is paying 10 per cent in informal payments” (Ear 97). In 2008, the global garment industry was approximately \$3 billion of business, meaning that \$300 million moved under the table. But these funds don’t flow to workers’ pockets. Instead, only people with a position in the supply chain can touch this money (Ear 97).

Given the turn in legislation, the cut in production costs for companies, and the preponderance of cheap labor overseas, the garment industry in the United States has declined significantly. In 1990, there were 25,461 machine operators in San Francisco; by 2000, there was a 25% decrease to 18,122, and 92.69% were Chinese (Adachi and Lo 51-52).

¹¹⁶ Bangladesh, in particular, is known for its cheap garment labor (Adachi and Lo 55).

¹¹⁷ For example, in Cambodia in 2013, “approximately 93 per cent of garment factories [were] foreign owned... and a significant part of the profits were repatriated” (GMAC 10 quoted by Ear 93). These repatriated funds can occur because of the loophole in Item 807 of the U.S. Tariff Code, which dictates that when U.S. industries send cut pieces of cloth to be assembled overseas, they only have to pay a tariff on the “value added” to these garments (rather than the value of the entire garment).

The last unionized apparel factory in San Francisco, the San Francisco Sewing Association, closed in 2004.

Covid-19 has thrown recent numbers into disarray, but the Garment Worker Center estimates that there are now 45,000 workers in California, “the sweatshop capital of America”; most of these workers are immigrant women, and over 12,000 of them qualify as disabled (Nuncio, quoted by CBS San Francisco). The garment workplace in California, then, is still a site of contradictions; it continues to provide a method of income for immigrant women and other workers who often struggle to find employment. Yet simultaneously, garment work is still a site of underpayment, unsafe conditions, and wage and rights exploitation. More broadly, we have not yet addressed the systematic dearth of employment opportunities for these workers, or why this dearth exists, and seem unlikely to do so anytime soon.

Performance as Care Ethic

In light of these intertwining crises, I argue that *Sweatshop Overlord* offers a new performative framework for responding to dire social, political, and economic conditions: care. Using a variety of theatrical tactics, *Sweatshop Overlord* embodies care practices. It also re-tools them, expanding expectations of what care can be, how it can operate, and who it can be for.

The field of feminist care can be traced back to psychologist Carol Gilligan, who lays the groundwork for analyzing Wong’s embodiment of women-driven care. *In a Different Voice*, the foundational book on feminist care, addresses Gilligan’s concern that theories of

human development automatically assume and privilege male identity as the norm.¹¹⁸

Women, Gilligan's research discovers, often view themselves in relation to men, or in support of male autonomy. They define their identities through the role that intimacy and care play in these relationships. Moreover, women judge themselves according to the responsibility and care they accord these relationships (Gilligan 160). As an intervention, Gilligan reframes this judgement. In her attempt to incite us towards equality, "that everyone should be treated the same," she articulates an ethic of care (Gilligan 174). Instead of seeing this as a lack of individuation, she sees it as "the truth of an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility" (Gilligan 173). Instead of engaging in attempts to achieve objectivity and detachment, she explores the psychological grounds for engaging responsively. While Gilligan's declares that this ethic of care is associatively characterized by theme, not gender, in practice, she locates it firmly within female identity, and more specifically women's morality (2).¹¹⁹

Wong's work doesn't take up Gilligan's claim that care is located within women's identity or morality. Instead, the Aunties who embody care come in all gender identities. As such, *Sweatshop Overlord's* vision of care ethic is aligned more closely with Joan C. Tronto's. Instead of aligning care with the identity of women or women's morality, Tronto contests Gilligan's work for being deeply binary, and instead aligns care ethic with the values traditionally associated with women. Tronto then connects these values to the over-arching

¹¹⁸ Interestingly, Gilligan's work also inspired by her study of Kristin Linklater's vocal techniques, i.e., one the United States' most influential teachers of theatrical voice and idea of "freeing" the voice. Gilligan also makes heavy use of references to literature and theatre throughout the book, including Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, and others.

¹¹⁹ Feminist scholars, including Fiona Robinson, for example, have critiqued this aspect of Gilligan's work.

value of relationality: a value which Wong continually highlights. Valuing relationality also undermines neoliberal values of individualism. Where Gilligan focuses on equality, Tronto instead considers respect and justice as it celebrates the ordinary lives of all people. She argues for a broader, more public facing feminist care ethic. “What would it mean,” she asks, “to take seriously, as part of our definition of a good society, the values of caring-attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion, meeting others' needs – traditionally associated with women and traditionally excluded from public consideration?” (2-3). To accomplish this move, Tronto re-thinks boundaries surrounding care, forcing readers to consider what, and who, is included and excluded in the name of care. Ultimately, Tronto charges us with shifting these paradigms towards interdependence in the name of care. For Tronto, care is inherently relational. It “implies a reaching out to something other than the self,” and takes another’s needs as a call to action (102). Most succinctly defined, care is a “species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible” (103). Notably, Tronto pushes readers to think against care as a dyadic relation, often categorized as mother and child. In *Everyday Utopias*, Davina Cooper takes up this charge through an ethnographic accounting of a Women and Trans Bathhouse in Toronto.¹²⁰

While Wong’s subject matter is notably different than Cooper’s, Cooper’s investment in expanding feminist care’s values scaffolds Wong’s approach to feminist care. Cooper uses a site of queer sex practices to provide a framework of feminist care ethics that stretches care

¹²⁰ Many contemporary feminist writers would deride the separation of “women” and “trans” identity, arguing that this categorization implies that trans women are not women. Given the abolitionist inquiry throughout this chapter, Cooper’s separation of these terms seems more indicative of

outside of its normative tendencies. Cooper acknowledges that an idealized, “deliberately utopian model of motherhood or parenting” underlies many theorists’ approaches to care, despite the wide swathe of subject matter in these foci (Cooper 113).¹²¹ Cooper studies a sex space for LGBTQ+ women through the lens of feminist care ethic to emphasize its value as a place of creativity.

Cooper’s work offers two contributions of particular relevance to *Sweatshop Overlord*: a focus on self-need and the belief that the pursuit of pleasure can also be considered through the lens of care. Whose needs count in care ethic, and do self-needs count? Acknowledging personal needs in a framework of care is different than prioritizing the self within neoliberalism; in the former, the self is often overlooked in service of prioritizing others’ needs, while in the latter, needs at large (and particularly others’ needs) are disregarded and seen as weaknesses. While Cooper acknowledges that self-care is theoretically primary for many care ethicists, she also highlights the limited attention that this self-care has received, and the ambiguity of circumstance and vision surrounding this self-care (Cooper 116). Cooper’s site of inquiry is different than Wong’s, but her work provides a framework for simultaneously thinking with and beyond care ethic. By taking up the ways in which sexual acts intersect with Tronto’s values of caring-attentiveness, responsibility, compassion, meeting others’ needs, Cooper also considers how people articulate, enact, and meet their self-need.

Sweatshop Overlord expands on these values and also expands on communities enacting care. While the framework of care is applied across multiple disciplines, it is most

¹²¹ The foci that Cooper lists include international relations, feminist jurisprudence, the environment, child caregivers, animals, public welfare provision, amongst many others. (Cooper 101).

often applied to everyday behaviors and either the general public or a specific, women-centered group. As such, care is inherent to Auntie Sewing Squad. But as *Sweatshop Overlord* demonstrates, not only is care performative in that it encourages audience members to engage in specific acts and affects, but performance, as *Sweatshop Overlord* shows, can also perform care.

Performance theorists, both past and present, have articulated the ways in which performance does work upon us. In *Against the Romance of Community*, Miranda Joseph analyzes the ways in which the practices of Theatre Rhinoceros, an iconic gay theatre in San Francisco, are so deeply imbricated in capitalist, homonormative relations, despite Theatre Rhinoceros' goals of enlightenment and liberation. Dolan takes an alternative approach; she asks readers to embrace a politics of transformation, the possibilities of hope and idealism, within theatre. Dolan argues that performance can teach us how "reinvest our energies in a different future," inspiring the audience to ally with each other and a "broader, more capacious sense of a public," in which performances can make an affective understanding of how the world might be better, palpable to the audience, if not tangible (Dolan 2; Dolan 6). Bertolt Brecht himself theorized *gestus*, or technique where actors use physical gestures to reveal a character or the performance's attitude or point of view. Important to Joseph's book is the emphasis on how much the term "community" serves to include as much as to exclude, and how it functions "from above" in order to control.

Joseph, Dolan, and Brecht have similar social goals: to make audiences critically engage with social conditions and their possibilities. Joseph critiques the ways in which performance and performance institutions become exploitative, rather than articulating alternative possibilities. Dolan's utopian performances are tied to civic engagement or social

action more generally, as opposed to a critique of historical conditions (15). Brecht often focuses on revolutionizing bourgeois values. These authors offer generative insights, but their frameworks are less applicable to people handling not just the larger crisis of neoliberalism (or, other economic conditions), but also the unexpected crisis of Covid-19 and its accompanying crises of exacerbated disparity, increased isolation, and extreme government neglect.

Performance as Care

As *Sweatshop Overlord* illuminates, performance can operate as a form of care. Not only does performance, just like care, encourage people to engage in specific acts and affects, but as I argue, performance actually expands care's framework of affective tactics and attitudes. As such, performance can identify the ways in which care operates, while simultaneously opening the way to new forms of care, helping to bring them into being. The flow between performance and care ethic runs in both directions; I argue that *Sweatshop Overlord* expands approaches to care ethic to now include performance and performative tactics. In so doing, *Sweatshop Overlord* stretches care ethic to include new values and tactics. In making this argument, I build on Tronto, who engages feminist care as a set of values, rather than a psychological experience primarily defined by women's identity (as Gilligan does). I align this critique, and Wong's work, with Cooper, who considers the ways in which the usual foci of care can spread.

In this section, I identify three care tactics, revealed and utilized by *Sweatshop Overlord*. First, I examine humor as care; second, I read the ways in which Wong highlights labor as a form of care through set aesthetics and dramaturgical inclusion; finally, I examine

an example of audience engagement as a form of care. Taken as an aggregate, I argue that these tactics not only stretch notions of care, but also that they position care and therefore performances of care, as forms of resistance to neoliberalism.¹²²

In *Sweatshop Overlord*, Wong never directly defines neoliberalism. Her closest articulation is the mantra-like question, “Is America a Banana Republic disguised as a democracy?” Wong raises this question three times throughout the show. The first time it appears, the question is raised because Wong is horrified that she’s unable to fix the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at the Children’s Hospital Los Angeles; the elastic in doctors’ masks is so old and brittle that they are using tourniquet ties instead, but she’s unable to access the masks because they’re in a locked room with an armed guard, since hospital masks are now being stolen and resold on the black market (13). The second time the refrain rises because Walter Reed National Military Medical Center has requested masks; she refuses, seeing their request as exploitative. This billion-dollar hospital, after all, has prioritized transporting and treating President Donald Trump with elite medical care (which is inaccessible to other patients), only for him to then hold super spreader rallies upon his release, over the needs of their veteran patients. In its final iteration, Wong raises the question to the audience because she’s horrified by the simultaneity of Jeff Bezos’ rocket launch into space, and a mask request from a Bay Area social worker. Here, Wong emotionally breaks as she contemplates the irony of a Bay Area social worker desperately asking a Los Angeles-based care network for help while a billionaire, whose work has been enabled and supported by the technology boom in the Bay Area (which itself priced the

¹²² For further scholarship on “tactics” and how they might contrast with “strategies,” see Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

garment industry out of the Bay Area), uses tax breaks to launch his friends into the air. In the middle of asking, “Is America a Banana Republic disguised as a...” Wong breaks, and shrieks, “Yes... the answer is yes!” (32). In summation, these three iterations imply that American identity and the United States government, as well as its history, are based on the prioritization of economic gain. Everyone – individuals, non-profit corporations (such as hospitals), and government bodies (both bodies in government and government agencies) – is a possible customer. To put it simply, the market drives all.

Instead of a definition, Wong presents an assemblage of neoliberal values and practices. This assemblage affectively communicates the chaos inherent to the lived experience of neoliberalism, particularly the chaotic instability of trying to survive Covid under neoliberal conditions. Each of the three analyses below indicts neoliberal values and practices of consumption, exploitative labor, and individualism. But rather than focus on these aspects of neoliberalism, Wong turns her attention to their alternatives: pleasure, community relations, inter-dependence, and self-care. These alternatives, I argue, are *Sweatshop Overlord*’s expansion of care.

Tactic #1: Humor as Care

Throughout *Sweatshop Overlord*, Wong enacts care by employing humor as she articulates the intertwining horrors of neoliberalism, historical exploitation, and the Covid pandemic. Wong utilizes satire, tongue-in-cheek jokes, and self-deprecation to move between political critique, social commentary, relationship advice columnist, and more. I recognize Wong’s choice to employ humor as an act of care because these moments encourage the audience to laugh communally, processing the trauma of the pandemic (or other forms of

inequity or exploitation) together. If care, as Tronto argues, is inherently relational, then here, Wong demonstrates care by using humor as a dramatic tool to reach out to the audience and engage them, providing an opportunity for affective release, pleasure, and increased interconnectivity. In her research, Cooper encourages feminist theorists to center questions of sexual pleasure in care practices. *Sweatshop Overlord* doesn't utilize the same focus; the phrase "No Titillation!" becomes a joking mantra throughout the whole play.¹²³ However, *Sweatshop Overlord* a focus on a different kind of pleasure. This pleasure is driven by the play's inclusion and invocation of humor. It is affective, communal, and intended to bring the audience together. It's relational but non-familial, which, again, according to Cooper, also expands care's "normative" tendency to uphold motherhood or parent as the relation basis of care. As such, humor weaves throughout *Sweatshop Overlord* in a multiplicity of ways.

In this section, I read two moments that utilize humor to enact care. Firstly, I analyze two examples that use joking confrontation and tongue-in-cheek exaggeration to neoliberalism as a consumerist mentality, building upon the earlier discussion of neoliberalism. Secondly, I read the titular moment of the play: when Wong satirically claims herself as the "Sweatshop Overlord." While there are a multitude of jokes, quips, and comedic moments throughout the entire play, these two interventions exemplify the way *Sweatshop Overlord* uses both text and mise en scène to create humor.

The first humorous example of care begins with a declaration of connectivity. A quarter of the way through the play, Wong waxes poetic about the love she feels for others – to her great surprise. Her voice grows soft and her eyes almost dreamy as she looks beyond

¹²³ This mantra continues until the one notable moment of titillation at the end of the play; a slide of a mask sewn by Wong's mother, which is printed with naked men, pops up on the projector.

the audience to unexpectedly connect with a stranger who is picking up mask materials. She vocally plays into this moment of discovery as she tells the audience, “So many of these Aunties are willing to sacrifice their lives to help someone they never met before either. And for that help, I feel... what is that feeling?” (15). She grabs her heart and then ironically deadpans, “Unconditional respect and love... for others?” (*Sweatshop Overlord* 40:20). This beat highlights Wong’s growing awareness and appreciation of others, leading it to expand care. For Tronto, care implies a reaching out to something other than the self (102). But here, Wong’s actions, and the affective state that results from them, don’t imply a reaching out – they embody it. The sentimentality of this moment is then undercut by Wong’s ironic delivery, which is further emphasized by the irony of the following moment.

Wong’s tender connection to her feminist allies is cut short by the humorous intrusion of neoliberalism. As the audience laughs in response to her query, a text pings. She pulls out a cellphone from her lavender fanny pack, reads the text, and immediately shrieks, “No! We’re not making customized masks for your pandemic wedding! We’re trying to stop genocides right now, with what fabric we can scavenge in a pandemic!” (15). Here, Covid, the consumerist neoliberal mentality, and the wedding industrial complex intrude upon the care enacted by the Auntie Sewing Squad. While weddings are theoretically about acts of love (a form of care), in actuality, they often become opportunities to assert identity through consumption. With this request, as with all requests, questions of morality and more judgement implicitly arise: why these masks are being made, for whom they’re being made, and what is the level of need that contextualizes each request?

In response, and perhaps, in desperation, Auntie Sewing Squad creates a core list of values, which include anti-capitalism. As Wong states, “Transactional relationships got us in

this mess in the first place,” a drum roll slides into the background. It sounds like a Civil War era call to arms as Wong darkly jokes, “we’ve replaced real human care with Starbucks gift cards” (15). This moment might serve as a Brechtian opportunity to laugh and think simultaneously, but it also offers the audience a moment of humorous release. The second example of humor, where Wong claims the title of Sweatshop Overlord about a third of the way through the play, also provides the audience with an opportunity think, laugh, and release.

Wong’s transformation into the Sweatshop Overlord jokingly confronts the audience, encouraging them to consider who are the true villains of the pandemic, the ways in which the exploitation of marginalized bodies is villainy, and even educate themselves about the historical demographics of sweatshop contractors. Antonio Scuderi argues that the “subversive” nature of satire enables it to be “a tool for turning a situation on its head, revealing infamy and hypocrisy, and getting to the truth” (15). Because directorial and design choices extend the heightened nature of this moment, the production pushes this moment into satire. In other words, the theatrical vocabulary of this moment becomes so overtly dramatic, in contrast to the design vocabularies that have come before, that the absurdity of this transformation is easily be recognized by the audience, which allows them to playfully grapple with the implications of this shift. This transformation operates as the climax to the introduction of the Aunties who make up the first wave of Auntie Sewing Squad.

As she calls up each Auntie, Wong humorously hails them. Wong shares each Auntie’s full name, articulates their professional jobs, states their history (and potential innovations) with sewing, and then frames each participant as a military recruit. For example, Auntie Valerie Soe’s “weapon of choice” is a “70s Kenmore from Sears.” Uncle Van Huynh

honed his sewing skills by tailoring his prison uniforms with sharpened paper clips inside Adelanto ICE detention (10).¹²⁴ As Wong lists name after name, individual color photographs of the first group of Aunties are projected onto the upstage floor-to-ceiling screen. Wong begins to run rapid-fire through a list, punching the air with each name like a fervid cheerleader, and photographs take over the entire grey wall, creating a rainbow collage of old Asian women. Image after image fills the projection screen until she notes the demographic of this visual collage and asks the audience, “That’s a lot of Asian women! Is this a coincidence? No! Sewing was passed down to us from our mothers and grandmothers who did it as a rite of passage to America!” (11). A projection of Wong and her Yin Yin (grandmother) in their laundry and alterations business flashes onscreen. A funk-driven syncopated music cue with guitar licks plays in the background (*Sweatshop Overlord* 0:32:12). Wong stands centerstage and explains, “when the Yellow Peril came to America, WHITE people didn’t like that immigrants were coming for their jobs. So laundry was the only work Chinese people could do at the time, because it was considered women’s work” (11-12). Wong vocally underscores this final phrase and then suddenly the music warps before cutting out.

As Wong first claims the title of “Sweatshop Overlord,” the directorial and design-driven mise en scène satirically emphasize this shift; projections, sound, lights, text, and blocking all utilize design vocabularies traditionally associated with “villainy” to heighten this moment. While an extensive survey of design choices associated with antagonists is outside the scope of this analysis, several elements bear noting, namely, the inclusion of

¹²⁴ Van Huynh is the only Uncle in this initial wave. Later on, other men, and transgender and non-binary folk join. Nonetheless, the term “Auntie” is used to generally refer to the group of

stormy or elemental weather, shadowy, non-realistic lighting, and modulated vocals. Stormy weather is often associated with evil people or evil doing, as can be seen in pop culture touchstones such as recent Batman films and video games in which Gotham is always drizzling, dreary, or stormy (Rusk and Gordon; Harradence); the thunder and lightning emphasizing the climactic confrontation in *Spiderman 2*, where Harry Osborn discovers the betrayal of his best friend, inevitably determining his path towards the villainy of the Green Goblin (*Spider-Man 2*, 1:42:45)¹²⁵; or the culminating scenes in *Game of Thrones* where ash and smoke read as snow and fog in King's Landing, after Daenerys Targaryen's dragon-led destruction ("King's Landing"). This trope also occurs more historically, such as in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, when the witches bring bad weather with them.¹²⁶ Or, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in which the titular King screams at the storm.¹²⁷ This inclement weather also leads dramatic, non-realistic lighting to be associated with villainy. Take, for example, the shadows of desolated Mordor in *Lord of the Rings*, the shadowy top and side lighting seen throughout *Hannibal*, or the dark fog and shadows swirling around Voldemort's return in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* ("Entering MORDOR"; "Hannibal Clip"; "Lord Voldemort Returns"). Finally, many of the above titles (to name but a few) also align modulated vocality with evil, ranging from the husky sibilance of Voldemort (*Harry Potter*) and Gollum (*Lord of the Rings*) to Darth Vader's filtered, drone-like intonation to the soon-to-be Green Goblin, who is haunted by his father's evil laugh as it pursues him from different corners of the room ("Best Of Darth Vader's Lines"; *Spider-Man 2* 1:55:48).

¹²⁵ This section also includes the stormy showdown between Spiderman and this specific film's antagonist, Doctor Octopus.

¹²⁶ For instance: "Fair is foul and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (*Macbeth* 1.1.12-13).

¹²⁷ "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!" (*King Lear* 3.2.1776).

When Wong herself claims the role of villain, *Sweatshop Overlord* utilizes these vocabularies. After she details the history of sweatshop labor in the United States, in the ensuing silence, the bright stage lights fade and Wong is left in a tight spotlight with darkness all around her. Her voice takes on an echoing resonance. Physically, she begins to transform, miming electricity zinging up and down her arms. Her volume rises: “And in me... their [Wong’s grandparents’] dreams of GOLD MOUNTAIN have come wildly alive! I have become the default leader of these Aunties... Making the masks that the most powerful country in the world has failed to provide. This is my ancestral destiny! I am the SWEATSHOP OVERLORD!” (12). As she howls this last line, almost like a werewolf at the moon, she raises her arms in war-like triumph, lightning and thunder (both lights and sound) crash to the edges of the black box theatre, and she then looks beyond the audience – to the past? The future? The present? Her gaze isn’t defined, but Wong’s villain transformation is made clear. So much is at play in this moment – the textual claiming of villainy, the dramaturgical quick shift from history lesson to heightened theatrical moment, and the mise en scène emphasizing this villainous shift, that a myriad of possible meanings abound.

I read this shift as a humorous confrontation which sets up the audience to question why Wong, and not the government, is organizing this material care in the form of mask making. By juxtaposing the line, “[We are] making the masks that the most powerful country in the world has failed to provide,” with a theoretical claim to a position of power as a sweatshop contractor villain, Wong is pointing out the absurdity that she, a single Asian woman, is stepping in to address the United States government’s material lack of care. While she might be claiming villainy in this moment, the appropriate demarcation of responsibility is bleakly obvious: the government, not Wong, should be organizing mask-making and this

dearth of action leads them to be the real villains in this pandemic. Wong might also be slyly educating the audience on the fact that many contractors are Asian, further satirizing the sweatshop industry by critiquing the global economics that lead Asian contractors to exploit other Asian workers, or also planting the idea that the exploitation of Asian women is villainous.

This shift also, I argue, serves as a satirical manifestation of the rhetoric demonizing Asians during Covid. After Covid's emergence, Donald Trump and other xenophobic white supremacists quickly warped the public rhetoric surrounding the virus, terming Covid "the Chinese virus," the "Kung-flu," or various other racist terms (Salcedo). This terminology, as well as the ease with which it infected social media and exacerbated anti-Asian violence, indicate that threat of "yellow peril" is alive and well in the United States and that Asians are still "forever foreigners" in the United States.¹²⁸ While Wong doesn't textually delve into this here, her embrace of this caricature of villainy does the work for her. If she's going to be seen as a threat by politicians and members of the public, why not momentarily become one? Wong's costume of a neon orange and grey camouflage tank top, combined with a bandolier of thread spools, and a pair of giant scissors strapped to her back (ostensibly in place of a rifle) make it clear that she's parodying war. In this beat, for a moment, she plays into the idea that she is at war with the government. If satire reveals hypocrisy, then here, Wong is highlighting the fact that she, who is theoretically infecting the public, is in actuality, the care-taker who is organizing their protection.

Ultimately, the humor of this shift offers an opportunity for communal pleasure, stretching the usual foci of care. Wong leans into an ironic edge throughout this section,

¹²⁸ See, for example. Li and Nicholson Jr.

vocally lifting the phrase “women’s work,” intermittently physically lifting her eyebrow, and shamelessly playing off of the audience: essentially, letting the audience in on the overall joke. These overt dramatics are not un-noticed or un-appreciated by the audience; as Wong declares herself Overlord, audience members laugh, cheer, and clap. Just as Richard III’s self-aware declaration of evil intent endears him to the audience, so does Wong’s.

Wong’s overtly dramatic declaration of villainy, as well as her earlier self-deprecation and joking intrusions, allow the audience to laugh, emotionally release, and take pleasure, even as they simultaneously recognize Wong’s experiences of consumerist mentality and government neglect. Thus, *Sweatshop Overlord* performs a kind of feminist care towards the audience, expanding care to include non-familial relations strengthened by pleasure. Even as the performance highlights the contemporary horrors of the pandemic, and the additional crises of neoliberalism and anti-Asian racism, it also chooses to highlight either the absurdity of these horrors or these horrors in a satirical manner, thus creating a release valve for audiences as they process mid-performance.

Tactic #2: Highlighting Labor as Care, Parts I (Set Aesthetics as Relationality) and II (Garment Labor Characteristics)

In this section, I argue that *Sweatshop Overlord* performs care by drawing attention to the labor associated with the garment industry, as well as physical and emotional impact of this labor. Historically, care has often focused on the relational care, or the emotional labor that surrounds relationships. However, particularly for women who carry a double or triple burden of working inside and outside the domestic sphere, as many garment workers do, wage-earning labor and quotidian labor are not easily disjoined from emotional labor.

Garment workers often bring piece work home and engage family members in it, further imbricating labor and intimate relations. Historically, both employers (like contractors) and employees (such as sewers or cutters) have often overlooked or hidden this labor, exacerbating workers' exploitation. This exploitation is indicative of neoliberalism's persistent consumption of marginalized bodies (as I discuss extensively in my second chapter). Thus, I argue that care can and should expand to include the recognition of labor of all kinds, and I read this recognition as a form of resistance against neoliberalism.

In the following, I highlight two approaches to labor in *Sweatshop Overlord*. Firstly, I read the aesthetics of the set design in terms of feminist relationality which pushes against neoliberal values of individualism.¹²⁹ Secondly, I analyze the ways in which Wong notes the characteristics of garment labor throughout the play, aligning her experience in Auntie Sewing Squad with the experience of sweatshop workers at large.

Tactic #2, Pt. I: Set Aesthetics as Relationality

The set's whimsical aesthetic communicates an affective openness to the audience, further encouraging relations of care. Cream-colored panels demarcate a square on the floor as the audience sits on three sides of the stage. Two large tomato-shaped pincushions, the size of bean bag chairs, flop around the stage (sadly, Wong never flops onto them). A giant spool of lavender thread anchors mid-stage left. Packages of varying sizes, many with USPS stamps prominently displayed, are strewn in various clumps. And three bolts of cloth in pastel shades of tangerine, blush pink, and baby blue, which are reminiscent of yoga mats,

¹²⁹ See Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* for scholarship on the relationship between these two.

land in the upstage right corner. Notably, a Hello Kitty machine is placed upstage center in a position of power – almost like a throne. The effect of these large sewing toys, rendered plushily in complimentary bright colors, is that the set seems similar to a child’s playroom. I read this playfulness as an attempt to highlight the overarching frame of the show (that we are present to witness a story engendered by sewing), but also as a warm invitation to the audience. The set communicates that the performance audience members are about to see isn’t a pedantic attempt to lambast them. Instead, the set communicates that this performance will take place in a space of imagination and creativity, just like a children’s playroom. By grounding this imagination with the surrounding work tools, the set clarifies exactly where we are from the beginning – in a place of work – but also that the discussion of this work will encourage curiosity and engagement (just like children’s toys are intended to do).

In contrast to this plush playfulness, the backdrop to the set more directly highlights the labor of mask-making, which also highlights the relational aspect of care. At first, this backdrop seems to be the theatre’s brick wall, painted varying shades of grey. But upon closer inspection, the backdrop is revealed to be a quilt compiled of thousands of surgical masks. Throughout the play, slides and video clips are intermittently projected onto this backdrop, occasionally adding pops of color and movement. Even underneath these projections, the texture of the masks remains visible. This backdrop highlights the central theme of the play: the audience has gathered to hear about Wong’s journey organizing mask sewers. But because of the vast number of masks required to make up this set piece, the backdrop also inherently highlights the labor surrounding these masks: both the labor required to initially sew the individual masks (they likely come from a factory in China, which is per), and the labor required to sew these masks together (the theatrical labor to build

this set piece).¹³⁰ As such, *Sweatshop Overlord* ties itself to the international garment industry. It's an easy leap to wonder about the ways in which sewing all of these masks together impacted theatre workers emotionally, especially because, at the end of the play, Wong notes that by its retirement, Auntie Sewing Squad sewed 350,000 masks "with love and intention" (33). As she shares this final tally with the audience, the backdrop is up lit with a soft lavender light, so that the masks glow from the bottom of the stage. This glow makes the physical labor, as well as accompany affects ranging between love and intention, appear magical.

In the final moments of the play, the backdrop becomes a metaphor for the network of care that the Aunties now give Wong. As the Aunties gather for a retirement party, Wong is surprised to see that Aunties from across the United States have secretly collaborated to build and gift her a giant quilt. Simultaneously the set backdrop becomes the quilt; each mask is an individual Auntie's contributed quilt square in shades of blue, green, yellow, and lavender. As Wong shares her delight, she highlights the labor that's gone into making the quilt and the Auntie responsible for this labor: Auntie Sunn's coordination, Auntie Laura's sewing, and Auntie Melissa's top stitching. Moreover, she celebrates the imperfect presence of this labor, "The wayward hand stitching of each Auntie is so charming. Reminiscent of the hands that crafted the baby quilt made for me even before its maker even met me" (34). This moment is not an effort to apply normative care relations of mother/child to the Auntie Sewing Squad. Rather, I read this moment as an expansion of care to include more distant collaborators. In *The Heart of Justice*, David Engster asserts that "we all have made use of the general moral

¹³⁰ The majority of the world's masks are assembled in China, even if the set was built in the New York (or at a remote building site).

principle that capable individuals ought to care for individuals in need” (49, quoted by Cooper 112). Building on this, he advocates for a framework of care obligations based on concentric rings: moving from self to intimate relationships to looser connections and further out (Engster 55-58, quoted by Cooper 113). But while this framework makes sense for everyday care, *Sweatshop Overlord* shows that care can operate outside of this framework, and caring for looser, more distant connections, is also worth prioritizing. This specific moment also shows that the idea of distance, in terms of both geography and time, is malleable. Wong is an adult in her forties, capable of organizing a “shadow FEMA” (22). Yet here, the care that the Aunties have given her in the form of the physical labor, thoughtfulness, and time, required to make this quilt, has enabled her to feel as cared for as an infant. Finally, I also read Wong’s quote as a celebration of her pleasure in recognizing the individual humans behind this collaborative work, and also a recognition that this labor comes out of relationality, both close – and distant. After the play ends, visitors are invited to view actual quilt in the lobby. Here, they too, can see the gift of these imperfect stitches, and the labor that these stitches represent.

Sweatshop Overlord’s design highlights the labor that goes into mask-sewing, set-building, and quilt-making, which centers relationality and pushes against neoliberal individualism. However, this labor is not just acknowledged through the set, projections, and the New York Theatre Workshop lobby, but also through the ways in which Wong dramatizes the labor of sewing throughout the play.

Tactic #2, Pt II: Garment Labor Characteristics

In this section, I analyze the ways in which Wong dramatizes several characteristics of garment work: its overwhelming volume, physical demands (including the lack of breaks and rest), and integration of homework and piece work. Because these characteristics are emblematic of sweatshop worker' experiences, their inclusion highlights the exploitation that workers face. Since this exploitation is indicative of neoliberalism, I argue that *Sweatshop Overlord's* attention upon this labor, performs resistance against neoliberalism. However, I also argue that this integration draws attention to workers' skill and determination, performing care in that this attention encourages audience to re-value, not disvalue, these workers.

As soon as she publicly offers to sew masks, Wong dramatically demonstrates the endless volume of masks that need to be made. In her first "call to battle," she sews twenty-two masks for fire fighters. Her Hello Kitty sewing machine whirls away and we watch a stack of immaculate red and white masks glide through her machine. She searches frantically for elastic, army crawls across the stage, and howls like Braveheart.¹³¹ When she fulfills the first request, she crows triumphantly! She howls as she grabs a plastic t-shirt launcher, shooting masks out into the audience before collapsing. But! Immediately after her victory, a barrage of other requests flood her phone:

"Hi Kristina, my 90 year old mother could really use a mask..."

Yes! It would be an honor. I am still in my underwear. Mask requests have stacked up in the 6 hours since I was passed out.

I am about to make breakfast but--

"Hi Kristina. I saw the story on Spectrum News Story about you. I work in elder care"

"Yes! It would be an honor. No no no, you're the hero."

I get a text from my friend Sasha in New York. (excited) Her interior design clients in LA can drop off upholstery remnants to me today--

... I'm about to put a maxi pad on but---

"Hi Kristina, I'm an essential worker, I walk dogs--"

¹³¹ Note that "howls like Braveheart" are Wong's specific stage directions (6).

Wait-- How is walking dogs essential work?
I am tagged on a post that says “masks don’t work, you’re wasting your time--”
I am about to eat breakfast but— (7).

Here, Wong highlights the complete focus that garment work requires. Sweatshop conditions are notoriously dangerous, ranging from harmful work conditions to exposure to toxic chemicals to the emotional toll inflicted by verbally abusive bosses.

But garment labor itself can also be physically dangerous. Katie Quan, for example, shares her experience of sewing directly into her hand. She remembers,

My co-workers were cackling and pointing at me, while I sat traumatized and speechless after sewing right into my own finger. I tried to pull the needle out with my fingers, but to my horror the muscles surrounding the needle sucked it in even deeper. “Use your teeth!” my co-workers called out to me. I was doubtful, but since they were all watching and waiting, I went ahead and bit the needle with my front teeth, held on tightly, and slowly pulled the needle out. The boss checked for needle fragments in my finger, saw that it was clear, gave me iodine and a band-aid, and announced that I had “graduated.” Actually, it was more like a hazing, and it left me an emotional wreck (78).

Quan’s experience offers an example of the physical danger that garment work entails (such as sewing directly into one’s hand). But Quan’s memory is also notable for the way in which it reveals neoliberal expectations of garment workers. Rather than responding with concern, her co-workers seem to have a particularly casual attitude towards Quan’s injury. Quan’s co-workers don’t seem malicious per se, but they do treat this injury as entertainment, laughing at pointing at her. Even after they advise her in pulling the needle out, Quan’s co-workers and her boss are dismissive of her concerns and her physical and emotional pain. This dismissal is indicative of neoliberal work expectations: Quan is expected to maintain a machine-like productivity, even when a machine has drilled into her body, to ignore any physical or psychic pain, and to stay committed to the work after injury (instead of taking a break to seek additional medical attention).

While Wong does not specifically reference the ways in which garment labor requires constant focus and a developed skill set (at the risk of injury) when responding to this barrage of mask requests, this theatrical beat nonetheless utilizes dramatic tactics to emphasize this focus and skill. The pace with which incoming requests barrage her mirrors the pace of the sewing she's just performed in front of us: frenetic but precise, aggressive but accomplished. Moreover, her chaotic blocking, which constantly shifts her focus and body position from side to side, emphasizes this same pace. This beat also clarifies the way in which the demand for sewing masks impedes her ability to physically or mentally take a break; moments later, she declares, "I am so hungry because I haven't eaten. I am thirsty because I haven't had anything to drink. I am bleeding through my pants because I haven't put on a pad" (9). Just as garment workers have had to historically privilege sewing over their bodily needs, Wong does, too. Notably, here, her needs are not just bodily, but they are also specifically tied to women's bodies. Wong is not just representing the exploitative expectations of garment workers – she is representing the ways in which this exploitation directly impacts women's bodies.

As the show continues, the pace of the work and the pressure to ignore these physical needs, do too. Three weeks later, Wong declares, "The once frenetic pace hasn't slowed down. It's just become more normal." Then, half-way through the second month of Auntie Sewing Squad, Wong discovers a boil on her labia.¹³² She ignores (what turns out to be) her

¹³² In a work-in-progress showing Wong shared actual pictures of the boil. In the New York Theatre Workshop production, Wong used a hand pump to blow up a balloon-esque boil coming out of her pants. This shift may have been predicated by concerns surrounding showing explicit material onstage. However, I was disappointed that Wong backed away from showing this photo, as its shock value truly delighted and horrified the online audience, who loquaciously expressed their hilarity and concern in the online chat.

Bartholin's cyst, despite its increasing pain, size, and discoloration. Despite her growing "elephantitis of the meat curtain," Wong stays on task, working away (17). It's not until another Auntie intervenes during a pick-up and drives Wong to the urgent care, that Wong seeks in-person medical treatment.

This inclusion of Wong's bodily states, and her refusal to prioritize them over labor, draws attention to the ways in which care must expand to prioritize self-care. As Cooper states, self-care is often acknowledged, but rarely the focus of care. Care ethics has a plethora of aims: to "influence public policy, promote relational understandings of people's interconnected lives, legitimate an already existing 'different voice,' [and] figure out how people (and other bodies, including states) should behave" (117). The range and ambition of these aims, Cooper implies, have led self-care to be "ignored, downgraded, presumed, and partially included." Wong's experiences note the importance of this self-care, even if she leads by exemplifying what *not* to do. In an outside interview, Wong clarifies, "I want, if an Aunty is exhausted, they should stop" ("A Short but Meandering History" 00:24:03). As the examples above show, Wong herself struggles with overwork. Here, Wong intervenes in care by laying herself bare to the audience (so to speak), and therefore implicitly challenging us to act differently.

For people working within a historical lineage of garment workers' triple burdens (laboring at a workplace, domestic labor, and homework or side jobs), the encouragement to stop working, or to reconceptualize the form of care work in the name of self-need, performs resistance against neoliberal labor demands. Moreover, the heightened nature of Wong's refusal to prioritize her body over accomplishing orders playfully encourages the audience to consider the differences, or lack thereof, between Wong's experience and the experience of

predominantly Asian garment workers in sweatshops. While audience members might be tempted to sidestep this comparison, which would be easy given *Sweatshop Overlord*'s rapid-fire pace and Wong's constant jokes, the Overlord denies them this.

Even when joking, Wong uses overt self-dramatization to draw attention to the history of sweatshops, rather than ignoring the negative implications. At one point, a member requests, "I don't like the jokey use of the word sweatshop in this group! Can we use another word?" (12) While Wong doesn't identify this person, her whiny impersonation makes it clear that she finds this request ridiculous. In return, she jokes, "Aunties. Aunties. Aunties. We don't have time for the social justice conference right now!" In this moment, Wong refuses to ascribe to respectability politics, which are often prescribed by proximity to whiteness. Instead, Wong satirizes the idea that neoliberal expectations of garment workers aren't acceptable; she uses performance to point out the absurdity of these expectations. For example, she jokingly threatens to "snip the fingers off of any slackers" in order to ensure "a machine-like output" (12). This satirical move is effective because it is pitted against the fact that the most powerful country in the world has failed to provide masks for its needy. In other words, *Sweatshop Overlord* highlights the relative ridiculousness of protesting language when there is so action (or lack thereof) to protest. Even as it imposes neoliberal exploitation on workers both domestic and international, here, represented by Wong as Overlord, the United States fails to take care of wide swathes of various communities. For audience members who are closed to humorous criticism of the United States, Wong's choices are still effective, because they (over-dramatically) draw attention to the ways in which the Transpacific immigrant community perpetuates violence against itself. This violence is indicative of the classic structure of neoliberalism in which the market drives all. Thus, in

acknowledging the market mindset that drives Asians to exploit other Asians in the garment industry, Wong pushes against it.

Finally, Wong also includes the “home” aspect of homework, and the “piece” nature of piecework, making clear to the audience the plethora of ways in which garment workers are exploited. Because Covid demands social distancing and flexibility, these characteristics of sweatshop labor are referenced implicitly, rather than explicitly. For example, when Wong is overloaded with requests for the first time, she calls her mother, who lives in San Francisco, for help. Her mother responds, “Ok, ok, can you mail me fabric? Can they be pre-cut? How do I get the pattern?” (8). I read this moment as a subtle but dramatic representation of the loophole in Item 807 of the U.S. Tariff Code. This loophole (previously referenced in a discussion of the historical context of sweatshop labor), resulted in previously-U.S. based garment factories sending cut pieces transnationally and moving the labor of sewing these pieces together, transnationally as well. While this beat ends in a punchline about Wong’s mother taking a break from the thing she loves to do the most (“worry”), this moment also parallels labor between garment workers and the Auntie Sewing Squad (9). Both work in-home. Both are sometimes asked to compartmentalize and repeat specific tasks (like cut cloth or sew cloth together that has been pre-cut overseas). And for both, labor can provide an opportunity for exploitation, whether this exploitation occurs because of multinational companies or consumerist-minded individuals in the United States.

In this section, I read Wong’s dramaturgical choices in terms of sweatshop labor. I argue that she highlights and dramatizes garment labor onstage to parallel her experiences with that of garment workers. These choices, I argue, encourage both resistance of the neoliberal expectations of garment workers and care to expand by highlighting the need to

self-prioritize and rest. In the following section, I move from the labor represented and highlighted in *Sweatshop Overlord*, to another form of labor – audience participation.

Tactic #3: Audience Engagement as Care

In this section, I argue that *Sweatshop Overlord* performs care by encouraging the audience to break out of spectatorial passivity and into participatory engagement.¹³³

Throughout the piece, Wong interacts with the audience in a variety of ways: she utilizes direct address, casts them as different characters, and occasionally, asks them to participate in order to move the story forward. In other words, in *Sweatshop Overlord*, both Wong and the audience rehearse acts of care. Some of these acts are in direct response to one another (Wong and the audience), and some of them are in service of people outside the theatre. Because these acts encourage vulnerability and interdependence, they push against neoliberal values of privatization and individuality.¹³⁴ Thus, *Sweatshop Overlord* uses direct engagement as a means of galvanizing the audience towards care ethic and neoliberal resistance, inside the theatre, and as a rehearsal for them to do so outside the theatre, too.

In this chapter, I analyze the most direct moment of audience engagement: when Wong asks audience members for their material contributions to mask making.¹³⁵ Before I

¹³³ In this, we could also argue that Wong builds on theatrical practitioners such as Augusto Boal, Bertolt Brecht, and others. This argument, however, requires further inquiry beyond the current scope of this chapter.

¹³⁴ I discuss these values further in Chapter 2.

¹³⁵ While some moments of audience engagement encourage the audience to rehearse acts of care themselves, in other instances, the line between the audience rehearsing and Wong rehearsing is much blurrier, which further encourages the audience to recognize their interdependence, as well as their group vulnerability. In one particularly poignant moment of the show, Wong casts the audience as Aunties. She reflects on her changing relationships with Aunties who have recently joined, and shares, “Some of these strangers bring me pastries, even a full meal. Because they thought I could use a break. Thanks. I bring the food

read this moment in the play, I discuss Shannon Jackson and Claire Bishop's contributions on performance that hinges on direct social engagement. I begin with this theoretical discussion to clarify why I do not directly apply Jackson and Bishop to *Sweatshop Overlord*, despite the tactical similarity.

While *Sweatshop Overlord* tracks a story of social action, and, I argue, engages the audience in this social action as a form of care, *Sweatshop Overlord* does not fit into performance frameworks of participatory art (Claire Bishop) or social work (Shannon Jackson). In Bishop's project, participatory work is a manner of theatre and performance in which "people constitute the central artistic medium and material" (2). What's at stake is not aesthetics, but "a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy, a raised consciousness," or, a situation. Jackson similarly focuses on critically engaging works that center "the social"; her goal is to better understand the stakes and limits of the "social turn," and the ways in which these shift within performance (5). Jackson often includes a consideration of institutions, as she is deeply concerned that artists and social actors, such as the audience, have begun to (politically and emotionally) divest from institutional support systems. However, Jackson's hopes (that social work may galvanize social actors) diverge

upstairs, and I pause and chew. Sometimes they bring me so much food, I bring it to the next Auntie who comes for pick up." (*Sweatshop Overlord* 00:39:50). First, Wong mimes picking up a bag of food from a stage left audience member, and thanks them directly. Then, she "brings the food upstairs," sits down at her sewing machine, and eats facing upstage. She pauses, quiet for a moment. This brief moment of Wong's removal pushes the audience to consider the level of her engagement thus far; heretofore, she has laughed, celebrated, risked, and jokingly challenged them. But in this moment, the audience must sit with themselves and consider their own level of engagement. Moreover, because the audience is set up around three sides of the stage, the audience (on at least two sides) is encouraged to look at each other, rather than at her, and meditate on the ways in which they inter-relate to one another.

from Bishop's view. In contrast to Jackson, Bishop is more ambivalent about participants' response, as she sees spectacle having merged with participation (Bishop 277).

While Bishop and Jackson's approaches hold similar goals to Wong's work, Wong's engagement of the audience is more ambiguous than either of these frameworks allows. This ambiguity is part of Wong's intervention: it forces the audience to consider the ways in which they have participated and the kind of feminist community which Wong has temporarily crafted. Bishop focuses on performances where audience members are not viewers or beholders but instead, active co-producers; *Sweatshop Overlord* makes sure to delineate between actor and audience through clear boundaries of set, blocking, and dramatic arc (Bishop 2; Bishop 6). In other words, Wong engages the audience, but their participation is almost never required to drive the performance forward, and thus, *Sweatshop Overlord* falls outside of Bishop's foci. Wong's work theoretically better fits into Jackson's area of study, as Wong engages the audience so that they grapple with a "complex sense of how art practices contribute to inter-dependent social imagining" (14). However, while Jackson integrates considerations of globalization and late capitalism, she favors critiquing performance over a critique of these systems. For Wong, a critique of these systems is the performative act; in *Sweatshop Overlord*, Wong makes sure that we know that no space, no act, and no relation, are depoliticized.¹³⁶

In the most direct moment of audience action in the show, Wong recruits the audience as fellow Aunties. Shortly after Covid hits, Sarinya Srisakul, the first Asian American female

¹³⁶ Jackson writes, "For community artists for whom civic engagement is a given—and for whom a 'gallery space' is never 'neutral'—Bishop's sense that socially engaged art actually invokes 'community' to deflate debate and impose consensus is hard to fathom" (26-27).

firefighter in New York City, tells Wong that her fire unit is down to its last N95, presumably because firefighters supplied emergency medical care and patient transport. Wong sits down at her Hello Kitty throne, spot-lit and ready to do battle. The whirl of her sewing machines percussively sets the frenetic pace of the pressure she feels to finish sewing as soon as possible. She jokes as she counts down, “Is this bespoke tailoring?” (5). But as she attempts to fill this high-volume mask request, desperate to finish the masks before the post office closes, she finds that she’s short on elastic. Amazon can’t deliver for three months and JoAnn Fabrics and Michael’s are still sold out. After looking skyward for guidance, her gaze sharpens; the lights brighten and expand to include the spectators as she recruits the audience (*Sweatshop Overlord* 00:17:00). Wong begins to run around the stage, whipping people up like a political cheerleader. “Civilians!” she calls, “Bring forth your elastic!” She encourages the audience to cut the straps of their bras, throw down hair ties, shoelaces, purse straps (Wong 6). “I need you to break the fourth wall right now,” she cries, laughing “Woah! Woah... Woah!” as someone chucks a pair of dark grey boxer briefs onstage. She gathers it all up with a pair of bright yellow dish-washing gloves on (another humorous example of Covid safety), and the upstage projection fades to bleaker black and white panels.

Suddenly, the *mise en scene* shifts to dramatize the stakes of caretaking under Covid. The lights and sound change with a deep boom, placing us on a World War II-esque battlefield. Wong army crawls across the stage, evading potential Covid traps like doorknobs and cash, as the lights silhouette her and then the box in bright blue abstract shadows. Finally, she makes it to the post office. She mails the masks, just in time! In celebration, dramatic strains of string music begin to play, she grabs a t-shirt gun and starts shooting masks into the audience. Deepening her voice with a Southern accent as she puts on her best

Lt. Colonel Kilgore impression, she cheers and riffs on the iconic *Apocalypse Now* line, “I love the smell of hand sanitizer in the morning!” This beat utilizes a shift in design vocabularies so that this moment of audience engagement is as impactful as can be. Its hyper-stylization, from beginning to end, ensures that this beat stays with the audience, long after the play is over.

I read this moment of audience engagement as a rehearsal of care. Though this this beat is tonally hyper-dramatic and over-the-top, presenting Wong as a fighter battling in trench warfare, this tone is also entirely appropriate. While vaccinated audience members may be able to laugh watching Wong commando creep across a stage, the lived experience behind Wong’s story, that of Sarinya Srisakul, is a story of life and death. Covid did kill firefighters across the United States (“COVID-19: Honoring fallen firefighters”). Wong’s intervention, then, is not that she asks the audience to dwell on this or even to emotionally grapple with the reality of these stakes. Instead, her intervention is that she compels the audience to take action in the name of caring for these firefighters. As the audience throws down their hair ties, their boxes, their scrunchies, and their belts, she cheers. For Wong, any level of audience participation here is a victory. Then, after the audience engages and she fights through to mail the masks, Wong celebrates this victory with the audience (through cheering, shooting masks into the audience, etc.). In other words, in asking the audience to give her resources so that she can finish this stack of masks, Wong invites the audience to help care of her needs, as well as the needs of the firefighters. Once audience members do provide her with a small but material form of engagement (their items), her celebratory responses then ensures that they feel recognized in this action, and that they, themselves, can take pleasure in having participated in this care. Wong creates a positive feedback loop

around audience participation so that audience members feel affectively buoyed and empowered, and are therefore more likely to participate in this kind of way in the future.

Moreover, because the audience unites in their ultimate goal to help the firefighters (not Wong), once again, *Sweatshop Overlord* expands care's usual focus on intimate relations and also highlights the care value of interdependence. Against Engster's theorization, *Sweatshop Overlord* posits that care can also materially and impactfully change distant relations. Since the audience needs to band together in order help Wong get enough elastic (one hair elastic is not enough), and the play needs their participation in order to dramaturgically proceed, Wong makes clear that not only is she dependent on the audience, but audience members are also dependent on one another. Thus, *Sweatshop Overlord* highlights the ways performance can operate as a way of living out Tronto's implicit call to shift care paradigms away from neoliberal relations of individualism, and her explicit call to shift care paradigms towards interdependence (Tronto 102). Here, not only does the audience see others' needs as a call to action, but in *Sweatshop Overlord*, they practice taking action, too.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that Kristina Wong's *Sweatshop Overlord* performs care towards the audience. I assert that *Sweatshop Overlord* expands traditional understandings of feminist care in terms of its modalities (which should include performance) and communities (which should also include audiences). Wong's work also expands care tactics to include humor, highlighting labor through design aesthetics and dramaturgically paralleling characteristics of garment work, and audience engagement. To emphasize the fact that Wong

is expanding care beyond its traditional applications and values, and because the subjects that Wong addresses and explicates do not all adhere to a gender binary, I shift the language of “feminist care” to “care,” thereby embracing a more fluid understanding of community relations and the possible reach of acts of care. Finally, this work fights neoliberal values and practices through illuminating lacunae enabled by exploitation, articulating anti-capitalist values of self-care, rest, and relationality, and rehearsing acts of care with the audience. In this way, *Sweatshop Overlord* offers performance not just as care, but also as a form of resistance to neoliberalism.

Conclusion

In 2018, I began formally researching *The Cost of Work: Performance, Asian Diasporas, and Neoliberalism*. But, in less-formal ways, I had been researching this dissertation for many years prior. As an acknowledgment of the histories of work that have led me here, and as an indication of the scholarly routes my work will explore moving forward, I write this conclusion as a consideration of the ways in which my cultural experience intersects with my artistic and academic life.

As an early career, Asian diasporic artist, I interned for award-winning theatre companies in New York. I was “paid” in free theater tickets, below-minimum wage stipends, and the once ubiquitous crudité-with-hummus plates that appeared at every opening night theatrical party.¹³⁷ I considered myself lucky to be in such prestigious offices and the occasional rehearsal room. I talked with a multitude of generous and generative BIPOC artists about the ways in which they were grappling with the social and political dynamics of the Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) which employed them. I assistant and associate directed at League of Resident Theatres (LORT) around the country, gaining invaluable experience while also missing knowledge of theatre’s “hidden curriculum.”¹³⁸ In other words, I saw how to handle a carpentry crisis in the middle of tech, but I also had no idea that taking a meeting with an artistic director during these brief gigs was of paramount

¹³⁷ I say “once ubiquitous” because Covid-19 has shifted expectations of shared food at theatrical events.

¹³⁸ Here, I reference Philip Wesley Jackson’s term, “hidden curriculum,” which has been taken up by Henry A. Giroux and Anthony N. Penna as a covert pattern of socialization that prepares students to function in the existing workplace, in addition to other social/political spheres.

importance, or even what “taking a meeting” meant.¹³⁹ I tried to start a blog filled with interviews about how artists paid their bills, which of course, never lifted off the ground.¹⁴⁰

In other words, I came to this dissertation research with years of labor and affective investment behind personal questions such as, why, as a young artist, did I feel so simultaneously galvanized, disempowered, and (what I now understand to be) Ornamentalized by the American theatre? How was it possible for theatre artists to build careers when theatre demanded constant flexibility and such unsustainable working hours, such as rehearsals until 12a.m. and twelve-hour tech days, and what was the impact of this on their sense of self? Had it always been like this for artists working in the United States and around the Transpacific? And how could so many pieces of performance claim to be about “resistance” in some way (resisting patriarchy, racism, fascism, gun violence, etc.), if the process of creating these pieces, and even the work that led to gaining access to the creative process as an intern or assistant, casually perpetuated exploitation, especially for minoritized artists?

In many ways, these questions are unanswerable. Now, as an artist-scholar crafting a freelance career in 2022, I leave with them, too. But writing and researching this dissertation has given me a sense of the vast historical and socio-political undercurrents that shape the scholarly and artistic conversations surrounding these questions – as well as the currents themselves and their impact. Moreover, the artists whom I have discussed in previous

¹³⁹ These meetings are informal networking interviews that can lead to long-term relationship building and eventual employment.

¹⁴⁰ This blog was clearly ill-fated because, as I eventually discovered, the open secret of many working New York artists is that very few pay their bills with wages from creative projects. Instead, many support themselves and/or are supported through alternative income sources such as teaching, life coaching, dog-walking, waitressing, and familial or partner support.

chapters nuance these questions, and present their own, individual answers through various representations onstage.

Together, Lloyd Suh's *The Chinese Lady* (*TCL*), Celine Song's *Endlings*, and Kristina Wong's *Sweatshop Overlord* reveal some of the challenges that Asian diasporic women face when grappling with neoliberalism, and the labor that they perform in response to the demands imposed by neoliberalism. Each refutes a monolithic, Transpacific subject, and instead, showcases a laboring body in a state of material and/or affective precarity. As such, each performance confronts the logic of labor within the neoliberal world, and in doing so, attempts to either unsettle our relationship to this logic, or to directly refute it. As Afong Moy, the first recorded Asian diasporic woman, markets Oriental goods onstage (including, from the audience's perspective, herself), *TCL* theorizes the neoliberal gaze. *TCL* also directly challenges a linear narrative of progress and history, and thus, proposes the diasporic Asian woman as a prototypical neoliberal subject. This historiographical intervention, which is explicitly articulated in Chapter 1, is hinted at in Chapters 2 and 3. In *TCL*, Afong Moy disappears before we can follow her return to China, but in *Endlings*, we see the ways in which characters exist across Transpacific space and a kind of time-influenced-by-space simultaneously. The haenyeos are living ghosts, reaching across oceans, technologies, and culture. We see ways in which this simultaneity causes emotional and psychic disjunctures inside the Playwright, and the ways in which theatrical labor both reveals and exacerbates this fractured sense of self. While both *TCL* and *Endlings* consider the commodification of self in various, detrimental forms, *Sweatshop Overlord* takes this commodification to an extreme, and parodies it in the form of a titular character. Kristina Wong grafts histories of exploitative labor together as she recounts the history of Auntie Sewing Squad's activism

amidst the horror of Covid-19, expanding feminist care ethic into both a relationship with the audience, and an invitation of reciprocity to them that extends beyond theatrical walls. In all three chapters, I consider the audience's complicity in perpetuating neoliberalism (through a specific gaze, through investment in the institution of theatre, and through a specific relationship to the labor of care), which is to say that I grapple with my own complicity as a spectator and audience participant.

Looking ahead, future scholarship must acknowledge the elisions of labor that I experience as an Asian diasporic director and also complicate the complicity in my directing practice, too; while the analysis in previous chapters hints at praxis-as-research, most of it (with a brief exception in chapter one), does not directly consider it. As a new play director, my work maintains that global majority bodies must take up the majority of space onstage, and my directing process highlights the importance of valuing artists over art. Currently, my work centers on complicating representations of Asian diasporic subjects, most often women, and exploding the silent, encoded expectations of that identity which have been socialized and disciplined into us.

However, I, alongside every other performance artist, must contend with the disconnections between my beliefs, the hiring practices of those who employ me, the larger, neoliberal conditions in which we find ourselves, and the imagined world in which I want to create. As I begin to be offered larger contracts and must therefore navigate the "power-laden zone[s]" of PWIs, to what extent can I advocate for precarious subjects (Kondo 25)? How can I avoid being boxed into exclusively directing work by female Asian diasporic playwrights and the self-commodification to which this often leads? What are the ways in

which I can balance personal needs, the needs of local BIPOC communities, and the theatres themselves, when most theaters are now in a stage of active, ongoing crisis management?

Exploring the answers to these questions seems particularly fraught as the field of physical performance presenters winnows amidst mass audience decline and the end of Covid-19 relief funds, and thus, the employment opportunities for me, as well as other Asian diasporic artists and BIPOC artists at large, are seemingly diminishing. While I have heard anecdotally from friends in artistic staff meetings and box offices about the state of crisis in which most theaters now find themselves, a recent New York Times article reporting on a study of 143 performing arts organizations corroborated this gossip from the field: “The number of tickets sold was down by 40 percent in the 2021-22 season, compared with before the pandemic, and ticket revenues were down by 31 percent” (Paulson and Hernández). Though Walter Benjamin encourages historic materialists to remember that “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule,” this moment seems to present a shifting tide in the landscape of American theatre (Benjamin 257).

In the interim between the start of this dissertation and this state of on-going crisis, the field has begun to openly grapple with the dynamics driving my earlier internal conversations. Artists have laid bare the fact that creative process and behind-the-scenes labor matter just as much as onstage representation. They have also begun to challenge the status quo in newly transparent and demanding ways. Recent anti-racist theatre movements, such as We See You, White American Theatre, have called for a transformation of the theatrical ecosystem, including 50% minimum BIPOC representation on stages, budget transparency, funding parity for BIPOC theatres, and institutional embrace of anti-racism (Dear White American Theatre). When the new musical capitalizing on the world-wide

popularity of the Hallyu movement, *KPOP*, received racist reviews from sources such as the New York Times, the producers and Asian diasporic Broadway artists publicly disputed this treatment and demanded apologies (Culwell-Block).¹⁴¹

Nonetheless, it is clear that theatre as a workplace remains far from equitable and that theatrical work practices still have a long way to go. As Culwell-Block writes regarding *KPOP* reviews at large, “No major outlets sent Korean or Asian American critics to review the musical.” Moreover, societal expectations of Asian diasporic performers remain locked in neoliberal attitudes. For example, Sara Porkalob, a diasporic Filipino creator, set off a media firestorm when an interviewer asked them if they were artistically fulfilled by their work in Diane Paulus’ production of *1776*. They replied, “No, I’m not. The salary is good. My favorite thing in the whole process is my cast. So the social aspect and the salary aspect are fulfilling. The creative aspect, not so much. I feel like I’m going to work” (Frank). When the interviewer asked, “What percentage are you giving *1776*?” They responded, “I’m giving 75 percent. When I do “Molasses to Rum [a solo for them],” I’m giving 90 percent” (Frank). Soon thereafter, one of *1776*’s co-directors then attacked a “nameless person” (clearly directed at Porkalob) for their “ungrateful” nature on social media and Broadway artists of color and audience members began to weigh in on Porkalob’s “arrogance” and “lack of respect” (Cepero and Page; Blanchet et al.).

I offer this final example because it shows not only the whiplash that Asian diasporic subjects can experience when they step out of the position of a model minority, but because it

¹⁴¹ Two of the producers for the Broadway run of *KPOP* formally requested an apology for Green’s review, which termed Jiyoung Chang’s lighting design as “squint-inducing” and objected to the use of Korean through the show (Culwell-Block). Notably, *KPOP*’s stars such as Andrew Lim and the family and friends of *KPOP*’s performers have also taken to social media to protest this review (Lim).

also shows the ways in which societal attitudes towards work have been neoliberally disciplined. It is clear that the call of the future artist scholars is to confront neoliberalism in terms of its histories of exploiting minoritized subjects, attitudes towards work, and expectations of the emotional and affective psyches artists; *The Cost of Work: Performance, Asian Diasporas, and Neoliberalism* offers a glimpse into three such models of this confrontation. It is also clear that now, the future call is for artists and artists scholars to imagine a coherent and viable alternative beyond it.¹⁴²

¹⁴² Here, I again reference Fisher's concern that "not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (2).

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