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Tactical Objectivism: Recognizing the Object within the Subjective Logic of Neoliberalism in the Fiction of Tash Aw and Lydia Kwa

WEIHSIN GUI

How do contemporary novels engage with neoliberalism as a dominant mode of governmentality, one that is invested in the refashioning of societies as collective and individual subjects for productive efficiency and market optimization? In this essay I argue that, rather than simply thematizing neoliberalism and then staking out an oppositional stance toward it, writers like Tash Aw and Lydia Kwa examine the subjective logic of neoliberal exception in Malaysia and Singapore respectively by focusing on objects and objectification through literary aesthetics. Because neoliberalism is premised on the constant creation of new subjects, it is productive to consider the representation and recognition of objects and objectification in fiction rather than eschew objectification as simply contributing to such processes as commodity fetishism and social alienation. A focus on objects and objectification does not construe Aw and Kwa as merely writing about or reducing characters and people into insensate clumps of matter; on the contrary, drawing on the scholarship of Pierre Bourdieu and Theodor Adorno on the conceptual place of objects in art and literature, I suggest that Aw's and Kwa's novels recognize the importance of objects as a counterpoint to neoliberalism's emphasis on subject formation, an objective recognition stressed in the recent work of Axel Honneth that distinguishes between reification and objectification. While the former leads to calculating instrumentalization, the latter offers the possibility of interpersonal engagement premised on an antecedent or initial recognition. In Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* and Kwa's *This Place Called Absence*, we see an objectification of the subject that offers us a glimpse of alternative modes of social relations and self-fashioning that might be foreclosed by neoliberal rationality.

This essay consists of three sections: first, I discuss neoliberalism as a form of economic and governmental rationality, drawing on lectures by

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Michel Foucault and more recent work on neoliberalism in the Malaysian and Singaporean contexts. I argue that neoliberalism has a cultural logic in addition to its more obvious economic and governmental aspects, producing what C. J. Wan-ling Wee calls “the Asian modern”—a product of a “hegemonic Euro-American West” that is “reterritorialized into a varied yet consistent vision” promulgated by authoritarian Asian governments (30). Neoliberalism and national identity are conjoined as cultural practice in various state-sponsored initiatives and campaigns for innovation and development in the knowledge economy. Literature, as both a product of and an intervention in the field of cultural production, represents and comments on such neoliberal cultural representations, not by portraying Malaysia’s and Singapore’s cultural *realities*, but by engaging with their underlying cultural *logic*. To illustrate this, the second section of my essay turns to the literary and aesthetic criticism of Pierre Bourdieu and Theodor Adorno. Bourdieu’s analysis of the objective valence of novels like Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education* within the field of literary-cultural production complements Adorno’s philosophical insights regarding the status of modernist artworks as objects and the processes of objectification that take place within them. This pairing of Bourdieu and Adorno enables my reading of *The Harmony Silk Factory* and *This Place Called Absence* in the final section of this essay as performing a tactical objectivism that considers the possibility of sociality and selfhood formed through objective relations rather than subjective interpellation. This tactical emphasis on objects and objectification is distinct from a strategic exoticism exhibited by earlier postcolonial authors and from the twin technologies of “subjectivity” and “subjection” that exhort individuals to “optimize choices, efficiency, and competitiveness” and regulate national populations for “optimal productivity” in the global marketplace (Ong 6).

NEOLIBERALISM AND THE CULTURAL EXUBERANCE OF THE “ASIAN MODERN”

Often associated with post-World War II principles of financial development advocated by the influential Chicago school of economics, “American neo-liberalism seeks to extend the rationality of the market, the schemas of analysis it offers and the decision-making criteria it suggests, to domains which are not exclusively or not primarily economic” (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* 323). While Foucault’s analysis might, at first glance, appear to echo humanist bromides about the encroachment of economic thinking into the social and cultural areas of human existence that consequently alienates people from themselves and each other, there are important implications to be drawn from the shift from liberal to neoliberal capitalism. First, neoliberalism emphasizes the development of subjects who can constantly self-manage and optimize themselves for maximum efficiency. Under this

rubric the conventional ideas that “capitalism transforms the worker into a machine and alienates him as a result” and that (at the other end of the capital-labor-commodity equation) “consumption simply consists in being someone in a process of exchange who buys and makes a monetary exchange in order to obtain some products” no longer hold sway (Foucault, *Biopolitics* 224, 226). Neoliberalism is not so much interested in creating alienated workers and conspicuous consumers as it is in cultivating an economic creature who is “entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producers, being for himself the source of [his] earnings”; it replaces the “partner of exchange” (who is defined by his or her utility and needs) for the man or woman of enterprise who is motivated to continuously innovate and invest in his or her own productive power, and to do so in a self-managed or self-regulated way (Foucault, *Biopolitics* 226). Second, this emphasis on the care of oneself and one’s entrepreneurial spirit is a form of *biopower*, an affirmative power enacted upon a social body that manages and regulates how individuals ought to live rather than a punitive power that chastises or prohibits them from acting or thinking in specific ways. While a government with a neoliberal disposition might appear to eschew racism and discrimination within a multiracial or multicultural context in order to fashion good entrepreneurial subjects, nonetheless, “in the realm of racial and ethnic difference, the generative nature of biopower” is “liberally intended, discourse bound, culturally produced and transmitted” and “all social relations become subordinate to the discursive network that has been generated to keep it going, so much so that even a negative, discriminatory fact such as racism is legitimated in the name of the living” (Chow 15, 9). In the case of Malaysia and Singapore, this legitimation is made in the name of the people as a collective whose continued survival and flourishing as a subject takes the embodied form of the nation. What is important here is that although “neoliberal governmentality results from the infiltration of market-driven truths and calculations into the domain of politics” (Ong 4), this in no way suggests that finance capital or other deterritorialized global flows have definitively eroded the power of the state.

One might extend Ong’s analysis by characterizing neoliberal rationality as a politico-economic ideology that interpellates members of a society as (on the one hand) normative subjects considered as aggregate populations or demographic groups through technologies of subjection and (on the other hand) exceptional subjects labeled as entrepreneurial and self-managing individuals through technologies of subjectivity. However, the subjectification of a people as an aggregated population does not necessarily translate into a social formation that enables an equitable redistribution of wealth and power among different groups, because simultaneously each person is called upon to act as an autonomous individual. In other words, between subjectification and subjectivity, the idea of society and social goods may be foreclosed. Both the Malaysian and Singaporean governments have in

the past two decades pursued via different avenues this brand of neoliberal economic and social structuring. While the Malaysian state remains committed to protecting the special rights of the *bumiputera* or indigenous peoples such that Malay-Muslims continue to dominate in the “pre-existent ethno-cratic climate” of racial divisions structuring Malaysia since independence in 1957 (Leong 83), the principles underwriting various state-sponsored initiatives to make the country more competitive in the global economy suggest, on the surface at least, a post-racial neoliberal rationality at work. The 1980s saw projects such as the Look East Policy to generate investment in Malaysia from Japan and Korea in order to create a Malaysia Incorporated identity; in the 1990s there were the grand Vision 2020 and *Bangsa Malaysia* programs coupled with the establishment of the Multimedia Supercorridor (MSC) to promote a fully developed and integrated country competitive in the twenty-first century’s knowledge economy; more recently, in 2010, we witness the 1Malaysia campaign with its blatantly market-oriented and imperative slogan “People First. Performance Now” premised “on the basis of reality and not any dream” (Johns 117). Singapore has also promulgated a range of neoliberal projects, being in the 1990s at the forefront of extolling Asian values based on consensus and communitarian democracy (as opposed to the apparent individualism of Western liberal democracy) for sustained economic progress; in the 2000s, the city-state promoted itself as a global center not only for biotechnological research but also as a Renaissance city that welcomed transnational investment in new media and creative industries. These various state-driven campaigns have been assessed elsewhere (for Malaysia, see Leong and Ooi; for Singapore, see Tan and Yue). What is important here is that these neoliberal policies underscore the subjection of people as a mass or conglomerate for efficient administration by the neoliberal state and transnational capital in conjunction with the subjectification of persons as autonomous individuals who take it upon themselves to constantly innovate and improve their skills for a rapidly changing economic environment.

As opposed to the racialization of the nation in which economic roles within the nation are closely linked to racial identity, there is now a nationalization of race for the purposes of optimizing general economic productivity. We see both the centrifugal and centripetal spatialization of neoliberal governmentality at work; the centrifugal push to integrate the national population with a global marketplace of information-communications technology and foreign capital is matched by the centripetal policing of social discourse and the biopolitical hierarchization of this same population under cover of the nationalization of race and the cultural logic of national development. Although addressing a primarily Singaporean context, C. J. Wan-ling Wee’s description of this revised valence of culture is instructive: because “capitalism itself *is* a cultural form,” the concept of culture itself under neoliberal regimes “was (and is) conceived of as a *residual* category to

be revamped instrumentally as part of the radical reconstruction of subjectivity itself for the economy” (9). This suggests that capital has arrogated the domain of culture, pushing older understandings of culture into a residual position such that the dominant definition of culture in a neoliberal moment cannot be extricated from the relentless accumulation of surplus value and commodification of natural resources and people within an entrepreneurial economy. Culture in this new dispensation refers less to the cultural heritage—language, customs, and traditions—of an ethnic group and more to the cultivation—innovation, performance, skillsets—of normative (collective) and exceptional (individual) subjects. Both Malaysia’s and Singapore’s neoliberal projects are couched in terms of this new cultural exuberance of Asian modernity, where culture means the cultivation of self-regulating individuals who will continuously improve and train themselves as efficient producers.

ADORNO AND BOURDIEU: THE OBJECT IN/AS AESTHETICS

The cultural exuberance of neoliberal reason can be considered as what Theodor Adorno calls the “resonant directive” of the “jargon” of authenticity (*Jargon* 13). Although Adorno was discussing the idealism of early twentieth-century German philosophers like Martin Heidegger that promised direct and unmediated expression of human consciousness (hence “authenticity”), his insights regarding how this jargon or terminology of immediacy was evoked in post-World War II Germany as the country was undergoing a massive social transformation and economic revival under liberal capitalism are salient to our neoliberal moment. Neoliberalism is not only an economic doctrine but also a rhetoric of subject formation that employs a positivist jargon of authenticity as it exhorts these subjects to produce and perform according to a market logic sublimated as cultural practice. This kind of language “exaggerates general concepts and ideas of philosophy . . . so grossly that their conceptual essence, the mediation through the thinking subject, disappears completely under the varnish” (*Jargon* 12). The disappearance or ignorance of objects and their role in enabling the mediation between thinking subjects and their lifeworld is for Adorno a gross misstep, because “the dialectical moment in which language, as if it were something else . . . being being entangled in a progressing demythologization” disappears (*Jargon* 42). Consequently, “[t]he categories of the jargon”—such as subjection and subjectivity—“are gladly brought forward, as though they . . . belonged to the essence of man, as inalienable possibility,” and because of this “Man”—the *homo economicus* of neoliberalism—“is the ideology of dehumanization” rather than an instance of human life realized in a social being (*Jargon* 59). We may contest the subjective primacy asserted by the jargon of authenticity not by reasserting objective dominance but rather by restoring the

dialectic of subject-object to our modes of reading and relating, which Adorno suggests is his preferred method of critique: he is “more inclined to give himself over to objects than to schematize like a schoolmaster” (*Jargon* xx).

To give oneself over to objects is what Pierre Bourdieu has in mind in his analysis both of literature as a field of cultural production and of the work performed by literature itself. As a sociologist, Bourdieu’s work seems to be antithetical to any discussion of aesthetic value in literature, and his work has been applied by other critics to examine the complicity of postcolonial literature and writers with the exoticizing tendencies of the global literary marketplace (see Huggan and Brouillette). At the same time, there are alternative perspectives on Bourdieu that avoid reading his work as completely “dis-mantl[ing] the category of the aesthetic” and “reduc[ing] cultural experience to its sociological determinants” (Brown and Szeman 4). Certainly Bourdieu does characterize “the literary or artistic field as a *field of forces*” that constrain and regulate the kinds of texts writers choose to produce and how these texts are read as literature, but it is equally important that he also deems it “a *field of struggles* tending to transform or conserve this field of forces,” and the tactics and strategies employed by actors in the field depend on “the network of objective relations between positions” taken by them (30). These objective relations are not only vital to Bourdieu’s study of literature as a sociological object but also to his understanding of the internal workings of a novel like Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education* and its protagonist Frédéric. By representing Frédéric’s inability to write as impotence, Bourdieu observes that Flaubert “objectifies the principle of this symbolic power of objectification,” the symbolic power being the act of writing literature; Flaubert also “objectifies Frédéric’s relationships with the structure of the field of power which lies behind this impotence” (157). By objectification Bourdieu does not mean commodification or instrumentalization but rather a critical approach pulling us away from the subject toward its constitutive relationships and elements in a network. This can be seen from Bourdieu’s remarks in a following passage that “the sociologist lays bare a truth that the literary text will reveal only in veiled terms, that it will say only in such a manner as to leave it unsaid, that is, by means of negation . . . This way of withholding things which is characteristic of the literary view of life is the thing which, above and beyond the aesthetic function it fulfils [sic], enables an author to reveal truths that would otherwise be unbearable” (158). Here we see that Bourdieu, instead of relegating aesthetics to a product of social determinants, suggests that the aesthetic function is a base or support upon which the literary view of life, which reveals truth by withholding things or objects from subjective domination, can be established.

Theodor Adorno makes a corresponding point about the importance of objects in aesthetic thinking in philosophical rather than sociological terms: “The truth content of artworks is the objective solution of the enigma posed

by each and every one. By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection" (*Aesthetic Theory* 127–28). Where Bourdieu speaks of terms veiled and things withheld, Adorno talks of the artwork as an enigma that demands our attention to an objective truth, which it refuses to offer up immediately. We must reflect philosophically to arrive at this truth, and in doing so be taken out of our subjective state and cleave toward the objects at hand. Just as Bourdieu thinks of the aesthetic function as an avenue toward the objective revelation of truth, so too Adorno characterizes the aesthetic experience of art as a violent negation: "Artworks are a priori negative by the law of their objectivation: They kill what they objectify by tearing it away from the immediacy of its life... This defines the qualitative threshold of modern art" (*Aesthetic Theory* 133).

Both Bourdieu and Adorno aver that literary texts, as artworks, may contest neoliberalism's dominance of the subject and the world of subjective immediacy not by erecting an oppositional subject position as a foil but rather by emphasizing objects and objective relations. Objects are not merely insensate clumps of matter but rather those things, events, and people that are non-identical to the self as subject, the given world that is not-I. This consideration of objects and objective relations in aesthetics is salutary in a moment where postcolonial novels are prized for "taking the reader somewhere they are not familiar with and [giv]ing people information and feeling about something they know very little about indeed" (Dowd)—in other words, for the novels' essential identification with the cultures they represent and with the reader's ability to identify themselves in them. Whereas an earlier generation of postcolonial authors may have employed a "strategic exoticism" to address "the politicization of incorporation into a discredited global sphere" (Brouillette 4), I suggest that Tash Aw and Lydia Kwa are adopting a tactical objectivism, an objectification of the subject recognizing "the non-identical moment of experience" that "is a product of our physical engagement with the world, an engagement that takes the form of feeling, emotion, suffering, and the like" (O'Connor 69).

The distinction between objectification and reification has been stressed by Axel Honneth in his reassessment of Georg Lukacs's famous discussion of reification. Honneth stresses that reification, rather than referring to the totalization of instrumental relationships between people under the spell of capitalism, "signifies a habit of thought, a habitually ossified perspective, which, when taken up by the subject, leads not only to the loss of her capacity for empathetic engagement, but also to the world's loss of its qualitatively disclosed character" (35). This empathetic engagement arises from "an antecedent form of recognition that cannot be grasped in purely cognitive or epistemic concepts, as it always and necessarily contains an element of involuntary openness, devotedness, or love" (Honneth 45). Drawing on Adorno's observations regarding children's imitation of their parents'

behavior, Honneth further argues that “it is from the perspective of a loved figure of attachment that children arrive at an objective understanding of reality” (46); therefore, “the objective understanding of persons, objects, or issues is a possible product of an antecedent act of recognition and is not its polar opposite” (54). Objective understanding is therefore, in Honneth’s reformulation, intertwined with an openness and a recognition of that which is outside or non-identical with the self as subject, whereas reification forecloses or attenuates such empathetic engagement.

Honneth’s revised gloss of objectification helps us comprehend tactical objectivism as an opening up of the self as subject to an objective, non-identical moment or an antecedent act of recognition that is represented in literature as aesthetic mediation. It is also a politicization of objectification in the literary field of cultural production that accentuates the field as one of struggle and transformation rather than simply of force and regulation. In contrast to the strategic exoticism described by Graham Huggan, objective, non-identical moments or relations emerge in Aw’s and Kwa’s novels as tactics in the sense that Michel de Certeau discusses them: “calculated action[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus” (37). The thrust of Aw’s and Kwa’s narratives moves away from or puts under erasure the proper locus of the self as subject in favor of relations between selves emerging in and through objects. While strategies depend on “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships” that become “possible as soon as a subject with will and power . . . can be isolated” (de Certeau 35–36), tactics “must play on and with a terrain imposed on [them] and organized by” more powerful forces, and they are “maneuver[s] ‘within the enemy’s field of vision’ . . . and within enemy territory” (de Certeau 37). Aw’s and Kwa’s novels are written within the field of vision (Bourdieu would say the field of cultural production) of the global literary marketplace and within the conceptual territory marked by the cultural exuberance of neoliberal rationality, and their representation of the objective relationships between their characters does not work through the isolation of a strategic subject with the will and power to cohere or convey the significance of their novels. Their protagonist-narrators possess a limited knowledge of themselves and of the other characters in the fictional world, and while this may appear to be a rather conventional use of unreliable narration to illustrate the finite and constrained boundaries of human knowledge, the tactical objectivism of Aw’s and Kwa’s novels goes one step further. Unreliable narration can still be considered a strategic move that posits a subject-oriented consciousness as a proper locus framed or isolated within a narrative structure that exceeds that subject’s will and power; tactical objectivism folds, fragments, or reformulates the narrating subjects through the warp and weft of the narratives in a maneuver that “boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place” (de Certeau 37–38). That de Certeau emphasizes how the juxtaposed

elements illuminate a *place* rather than a person or individual is remarkable for it highlights an apprehension of a field of cultural production or contesting forces rather than an identity or subject position; this recalls the “antecedent form of recognition that cannot be grasped in purely cognitive or epistemic concepts” and must instead work through “the objective understanding of persons, objects, or issues” (Honneth 45, 54) in fiction that tactically juxtaposes these persons, objects, and issues through narrative form without affirming or asserting a central subject.

TASH AW'S *THE HARMONY SILK FACTORY*: SILKEN ENTANGLEMENTS AND GOTHIC RUINS

As a writer publishing in English and writing about Malaysia, Tash Aw has to make certain concessions to the global literary marketplace that privileges the jargon of authenticity when it comes to postcolonial or world literature. As the back cover of the 2005 mass market paperback edition of *The Harmony Silk Factory* announces, Aw seems to have “an authentic Malaysian voice” giving us “an exquisitely written look into another culture at a moment of crisis.” But the novel’s own formal twists and turns belie the native informancy, historical authenticity, and literary tourism suggested in the publisher’s accolades. In the very first part of the novel, narrated by Johnny Lim’s son Jasper, we are confronted by inaccurate or fabricated historical information: Jasper describes Johnny’s fascination with a Malay *kris* or long dagger supposedly owned by Hang Jebat, “the legendary warrior who, as we all know, fought against the Portuguese colonisers in the sixteenth century” (4). Despite Jasper’s insistence that this is a popular legend (“as we all know”), it is incorrect as Hang Jebat is commonly regarded as a traitor who turned against his sovereign lord and was eventually killed by his best friend and fellow warrior Hang Tuah. Furthermore, R. St. J. Unwin’s *Rural Villages of Lowland Malaya*, the “masterly study” of colonial Malaya that Jasper uses to offer a realistic description of the Kinta Valley is a completely fabricated text (12), and toward the end of his description Jasper begins shifting from quotation to parody as he notes that pupils at school “read Dickens” and “life was good, but not always. They have the best of times, they have the worst of times” (15). Aw’s novel is therefore less invested in offering a historical authentic depiction of colonial Malaya than it is with taking creative liberties with history, and the reliability of historiography is itself put in question as Jasper concludes his biography of his (seemingly diabolical) father, which he has researched from “books, official records, memoirs,” with the claim that “I have history on my side” (128).

The subject of both Jasper’s research and the novel as a whole is ostensibly Johnny Lim Chin Seng, or more precisely, Johnny’s life as recounted by three separate narrators: Jasper, Johnny’s deceased wife Snow, and his best

friend and self-proclaimed aesthete Peter Wormwood. As Wai-chew Sim observes in his reading of the novel, Johnny is partially based on a historical figure, Lai Teck, a triple agent: he was a high-ranking member of the Communist forces in British Malaya before the Second World War who allied with the British to fight against the invading Japanese military; he then sold out his Communist comrades to the Japanese, ascended to the leadership of the party, but later fled to Hong Kong where he was assassinated. While Lai Teck's historical role has been discussed elsewhere (see Stubbs), Sim astutely analyzes how, in the novel, Johnny/Lai Teck "dissolves in a welter of conflicting accounts, in an accent on equivocality and formlessness, thus giving the text an aspect of the sublime" and a turn from "conceptualizing identity in terms of filiation to framing it in the language of affiliation" (298–99).

The shift from filiative to affiliative identity accords with my own analysis of objective rather than subjective relations, and I extend Sim's insights further by contending that the self-consciousness of the three narrators—Jasper, Snow, and Peter—also dissolve as the novel's aesthetic flourishes deconstruct each narrator's subjectivity through a tactical objectivism. I am not completely dismissing the historical content of the novel; just as, according to Philip Holden, the fall of British colonialism and the Japanese occupation during World War II represent "a time of privation when the nation is forged" and "predicts the later rising of national consciousness" in Singapore, so too they are for Malaysia (351). But as a densely woven text of figurative language "marked by inconsistencies, aporias, and silences" (Sim 297), the novel also asks us to consider how objective "language" is "being entangled in a progressing demythologization" of the subject (Adorno, *Jargon* 42). In contrast to the self-regulating and entrepreneurial subject of neoliberal reason, Johnny, as the focal character, forms what Adorno would call the enigma of the artwork, and as Jasper, Snow, and Peter relate their encounters and relationships with Johnny they shift from a subjective to an objective position as they dissolve into the warp and weft of the text. To illustrate this, I will first focus on the moments of Gothic intensity that pull the narrative away from the grain of historical authenticity and mark the dissolution of the narrator-subject; second, I will look at the recurring motif of silk that objectively ties the characters together.

As Andrew Smith and William Hughes point out in their discussion of empire and the Gothic, the uncanny power of the Gothic produces a "collapse between living/dead, human/non-human, and self/other" that also underpins the process in which "the colonizing subject is displaced in its confrontation with racial otherness" (3); in a similar fashion, postcolonial criticism "indicat[es] the presence of the inherently unstable version of the subject on which such a [colonial] politics rest" (4). In Jasper's narrative, which he claims is largely based on archival research, he makes two visits to the house of T. K. Soong, his maternal grandfather. On his second visit, "the house was dark. It looked exactly like the house from [his] childhood

nightmares. It was waiting, ready to take [him]" (98). When Jasper enters the house and goes to his mother Snow's room, he is confronted by "walls [that] are hung with waterfalls of hot red silks" and a bed upon which his mother is sitting (98–99). Snow suckles Jasper at "her white breast," then gives him a gun and instructs him to kill an old man (presumably Johnny) sleeping beside her, but a weeping Jasper cannot comply: "Once more I bury my face in her breast but she is laughing pushing the pistol into my hand. . . . I cling to her with all my life and she kisses me on my forehead" (99). The narrative has stepped out of historical authenticity into nightmarish intensity; Jasper's deeply emotional and irrational breakdown here belies the "diligence" and "rational, organised study" of Johnny's life he has undertaken and the "measure of calm" and "peace" that writing Johnny's biography is supposed to have given him (6). The synesthesia of liquid and cloth ("waterfalls of hot red silk") surfaces again at the end of Jasper's narrative after he leaves Johnny's funeral and goes swimming "far out from the shore": "Where the water was deeper, the waves folded over gently" (134). We need not delve deep into psychoanalytical theory to decode Jasper's nightmarish family reunion; it is enough to understand his subjective dissolution as a result of an unresolved tension between himself and Johnny who provided him with a "crime-funded education" (6) and a yearning for Snow, of whom Jasper has "no memory" (76) and who needs to be imaginatively resurrected in his nightmare as the objective reason for Jasper's hatred of Johnny.

Similarly, in Snow's diary entries we learn that she, Johnny, Peter, and the rest of their party chance upon a strange ruin while visiting some islands, "a large building with ornate adornments over its facade—hideous carved animals [she] did not recognise" (235). Soon after, Snow hears a dreadful wailing every night that disturbs her sense of self: "In my sleep, things happened to me—to my body—that I could not discern. . . . The wailing burnt through my sleep, never allowing me to escape" (253). Finally Snow discovers that the man whom she is increasingly fond of, Mamoru Kunichika (the Japanese professor who is also secretly head of the terrifying military police), may be the source of the dreadful wailing. Mamoru violates Snow and she runs to Peter in a frenzy "like a wild creature" such that "[her] fingernails made harsh red scratches on his milk-white chest" and she "held him tight like a child clings to its mother" (260). The striking colors of red and white, Snow's physical comportment, and Peter's song as he comforts her "spread[ing] itself out to sea, drifting thinly over the waves" echo Jasper's nightmare visit to the Soong house and his final floating out to sea (260). The dissolution of Snow's subjectivity is triggered by her lack of love for Johnny: having "realised, with absolute clarity, that [she] did not know him at all" and that was precisely "why [she] wanted him" in the first place (179), Snow starts fancying the seemingly refined but actually abusive Mamoru but turns to Peter for succor, and this eventually leads to Jasper's conception. Peter himself is undergoing a physical dissolution, reduced in

Jasper's eyes to an old man "folded over in a wheelchair," "not able to speak, though occasionally he coughed and wheezed a few curious sounds" (130). The younger Peter, ever the aesthete, upon discovering the ruined building on the island pronounces it "a perfect tropical ruin" calling to mind "Aldous Huxley" and his comparison of "tropical botany to late and decadent Gothic architecture" (365). It is this decadent Gothic element noted by Peter that explains the strange shift in narration during the climactic scene on the island between himself, Mamoru, and Snow. What begins as a standard first-person narration—"I have something to tell you, I said to Kunichika" (391)—gradually shifts into a third-person account couched in highly theatrical language with Mamoru playing the part of the "evil, duplicitous scoundrel" while Peter takes the role of "the good and loving man" who rescues Snow the "distraught heroine" (393). While this might seem to consolidate Peter's love for Snow in a dramatic scene of self-assertion, the heightened language reminiscent of Gothic melodrama seems to overwhelm Peter's narrative subjectivity so that by the end of the scene Peter and Snow literally "dissolve into the deep dark night" (394). This objective diminishment is echoed at the novel's end as the aging Peter contemplates his final days no longer as a person but a "broken voice" whose "singing" is drowned out by the interminable tropical rain (404).

But *The Harmony Silk Factory* does not only enact the dissolution of the three narrator-subjects; it also connects them through objective relations that can be traced through the motif of silk. Johnny has an uncanny ability to work with machines; when he dismantles a car engine, according to Jasper "the parts of the engine fell away into his hands like pieces of silk; he held the greasy steel bolts the way you or I might hold a newborn chick" (30). For Johnny, the mechanical parts are not merely instruments or a means to an end; they are tender and vital objects that are an end in themselves. This is underscored when Johnny, as a boy, works a massive dredger in one of Malaya's many tin mines: "he does not see the monstrous, angry machine everyone else sees. Instead, he sees a living creature. He understands it at once" (31–32) as a thing in and for itself, rather than a tool designed for extracting the "millions of tons of ore" for the profit of British colonialism (35). The motif of silk underscores the objective connections between the characters, linking them across the tripartite division of the novel. When Peter first appears in Jasper's account, he is attired in "a flowing cape of Ottoman silk lined with iridescent scarlet" (89). The shining scarlet silk makes a reappearance in Jasper's nightmarish visit to T. K. Soong's house as "waterfalls of hot red silk," suggesting that the old man lying next to Snow in bed might be Peter and that Jasper's inability to kill Peter might stem from his ignorance about his patrimony.

Similarly, when Snow listens to Peter singing for the first time, she finds herself "perplexed at how his voice transformed itself, suddenly acquiring a rich, silky texture" (223); this is paralleled by Peter's initial encounter with

Snow when he is overwhelmed by a “gorgeous breathlessness and thrilling pulse” that feels “like sheet after sheet of silk covering a bare table” (295). Towards the end of Peter’s narrative, as he weeps over the impending tragedy about to befall himself, Snow, and Johnny because of the imminent Japanese military invasion, “a sea of silk shimmering [appeared] before” him and he “stepped onto the water and began to sink into its voluptuousness” (383). Just as Peter’s silken voice brings Snow comfort as it seems to “spread itself out to sea” (260), so too Jasper is tied to both of them through the red silk waterfalls in his nightmare and his final floating away on the folding waves. Although Johnny appears to be the subject of all three narratives, the novel objectively unfolds the relationships between Jasper, Snow, and Peter rather than asserting Johnny’s subjectivity, which remains “inscrutable” (186) even after three accounts of his life. These relationships form “the truth content” that is “the objective solution of the enigma posed by” the absent focal character Johnny (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 127). In giving an account of their life with Johnny, the three narrators are expressing what Axel Honneth calls “an antecedent form of recognition” that “contains an element of involuntary openness, devotedness, or love” (45). *The Harmony Silk Factory* is less interested in answering the question “Who really is Johnny Lim?” by instrumentalizing Jasper, Snow, and Peter as native informants about Johnny and Malaysia; it is more concerned with getting readers to understand the objective connections between these three narrators, connections formed paradoxically by the dissolution of their subjectivities into the silken texture of the novel. This element of “objective understanding” (Honneth 54) is a contrast to the resonant directive of neoliberalism’s technologies of subjectivity and subjection. Rather than oppose Malaysia’s neoliberal rationality outright, the novel stages a tactical recognition of objectivity.

LYDIA KWA’S *THIS PLACE CALLED ABSENCE*: THE DANGERS OF DISTANCING

A similar tactical objectivism is employed by Lydia Kwa in the context of the Singaporean state’s instrumentalization of creativity and alternative sexualities as it transforms the island-nation into a hub for creative industries. As one critic points out, “the Singapore government is not interested in creativity per se, but in industrialising creativity and innovation for economic gains,” because there is not only a “deliberate depoliticization of creativity” (Lee 47) but also a restriction on alternative sexualities and lifestyles that often come with the emergence of a creative class. On one level, gay and lesbian culture in Singapore has flourished to a certain extent with the promotion of the creative industries and the attraction of creative foreign talent as a national priority, such that “[t]he city-state is now recognised in the mainstream and the subculture as the new queer centre of Asia” thanks to the

recognition by both the government and the public that “sexuality” is a necessary “technology for cultural policy in the creative city” (Yue 366). But the latitude given to queer communities and the recognition of sexuality as a cultural policy cannot be equated with a social and political acceptance of alternate sexualities. Sexual acts by persons of the same gender are considered criminal, artistic events that highlight same-sex intimacy are banned if they are deemed to “promote a homosexual lifestyle” (“Singapore” 18), and reproductive, heteronormative sexuality is constantly protected and privileged in order to respect “the conservative moral values of mainstream Singaporeans” (Tan 410). There is thus a tension between making Singapore “sexy” as a global city conducive to creativity and alternative lifestyles on the one hand and the need to police and circumscribe such lifestyles and their corresponding cultural influence in order to maintain the city-state’s moral image as “a sanitized version of Chinese society” (Tu 154) on the other. Faced with this tension, Audrey Yue argues that for queer Singaporeans, “new economic and political spaces are created from below,” and “they assert that resistance is evident in the creativities of everyday life, in the way people use spaces . . . as an actively produced aspect of everyday life” (368).

While Lydia Kwa’s novel *This Place Called Absence* may not express an overt resistance to such neoliberal regulation of gender and sexuality, the novel contests the instrumental subjectification of queerness by staging the objectification of protagonist Lim Wu Lan’s sense of self through the demythologization of language. Like *The Harmony Silk Factory*, Kwa’s novel features multiple narrators: Wu Lan, her mother (Mahmee), and two sex workers from early twentieth-century Singapore, Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui. However, unlike Aw, Kwa makes the metafictional structure of her novel apparent toward the end as we learn that Ah Choi’s and Chat Mui’s voices are actually part of Wu Lan’s imagination rather than historically authentic accounts of prostitutes living in colonial Singapore.

Wu Lan, a clinical psychologist, is a Chinese Singaporean who has been living in Vancouver, Canada, for twenty years. After leaving Singapore, Wu Lan came out to her family as a lesbian, and only her father’s suicide a year before the present time of the novel brings her back to the city-state. Returning to Canada after the funeral, Wu Lan takes a leave of absence to recover from the emotional distress of her father’s passing, compounded by her abandonment by her long-time lover, Kim, three years ago. While visiting the library she begins reading an article and a book about Chinese and Japanese women who worked as prostitutes (commonly known as *ah ku* and *karayukisan* respectively) in late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Singapore. Two of these *ah ku*, Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui, begin to tell their life stories in short episodes interpolated with Wu Lan’s narrative and that of her mother, Mahmee’s. We learn that Ah Choi and Chat Mui are also lesbian lovers who draw strength from each other in the face of

their daily sexual degradation at the hands of their male clients. Ah Choi dies a tragic death from an opium overdose, while Chat Mui escapes thanks to the kindness of a gay Peranakan Chinese scholar whom she befriended earlier, and who arranges a paper marriage to free her from prostitution. Chat Mui eventually becomes a faithful family servant to Wu Lan's maternal grandmother, to whom the former *ah ku* passes an exquisite pair of hand-embroidered slippers sewn by her scholar husband. This pair of brocade slippers is eventually recovered by Mahmee, who sends it to her daughter Wu Lan in Canada.

Wu Lan's family members form a nuclear household that express the values of the "heartlander" moral majority in whose name the Singaporean state promotes heteronormative sexuality, biological reproduction, and economic entrepreneurship and efficiency. Wu Lan recalls how when she was growing up, "Mahmee knew how to handle Father with her indirect strategies, and sought emotional cushioning from friends and acquaintances . . . becoming passively pleasant when the man of the house arrived at the end of the day" (16). Wu Lan, on the other hand, was "[s]hrewd and concealing, evading [Father's], or anyone else's, attempts to understand me or my motives," a shrewdness that contributes to her crisis of subjectivity and emotional distress in the present time of the novel. Mahmee, besides trying to be a dutiful wife, also espouses a cultural chauvinism as she tries to downplay and deny her and Wu Lan's Peranakan Chinese heritage even though her own mother "wore sarong kebaya, sanggol siput on her head" (81). Despite Ah Mak's obvious Peranakan Chinese identity, Mahmee insists that "we are pure, we belong here, come from China" (81), in line with the Singapore state's vested interest in keeping its population predominantly ethnic Chinese.

Furthermore, Michael, Wu Lan's brother, is "a filial son" who is married and whose wife is expecting a child "not long after the requisite hundred days of mourning" after Father's death, and whose "Singaporean industriousness" makes him admonish Wu Lan that she "should go back to work soon" (94). Faced with such a tightknit and self-regulating family unit, Wu Lan feels extremely out of place and chooses to assert her own individuality as a lesbian: feeling "proud of [her] escape from Singapore, [she] convinced [her]self that leaving the country was the solution" (123) and she reveals her sexuality to her family in a joint letter, an act of "distancing" that her brother thinks satisfies her need to "separate from the herd" (20). But this separation is not a liberation of Wu Lan's subjectivity, because her "flight into exile resulted in internal fissures in the psyche, the cleaving of memory from memory" (123). This results in a disruption of Wu Lan's entire subjectivity upon her return to Canada. Her somatic sensations and sense of self no longer cohere; she has "clammy hands and a pounding heart," begins "feeling as if the floor would give in under [her]" and, as much as she hates the term, realizes "a nervous breakdown" is turning her into "a walking bundle of

jumbled, confused nerve endings” (7). It is only by revisiting her internal psychic fissures through the objectivism of language and recreating another set of memories—those of the sex workers—that Wu Lan can grasp a better way of relating to those around her, including her family, that does not require escape and evasion.

Wu Lan begins this process by objectifying her own name, the denomination of her self as an individual subject; she wishes she could “ingest [her] own name the way [she] consum[e]s food, swallow its various possibilities, assimilate their meanings” (124). Although “once [she] had been Lan-lan,” her mother’s “precious orchid” who “stayed close to home, homing in on her parents’ needs,” now she begins to ask, “But who is Wu Lan?” (123). To Mahmee, Wu Lan will forever be “Lan-lan,” her affectionate name for a daughter who disappoints maternal expectations because she will not “be like [a] flower” and “no man wants her” (68, 33). But the actual meaning of her name, Wu Lan, is unclear until she visits a Buddhist temple in Vancouver and learns that the character *wu* means a medium or shaman who casts out demons and exorcises ghosts, making her name preternaturally potent. By examining her name as a cultural and linguistic object rather than a label of subjective identity, Wu Lan begins to draw upon its various possibilities for a deeper and richer sense of self. She considers how “[i]n Mandarin, a sound can have many meanings, depending on its tone. In the first tone, ‘Wu’ can be a medium or shaman. In second tone, it can mean ‘without.’ The third tone can refer to dancing, and in the fourth tone, it can mean mistake” (123).

Wu Lan’s appreciation of the multivalence of the first character of her Chinese given name is important for two reasons. First, it allows her to reassess the biological and filial bonds of her nuclear family. At the beginning of the novel, Wu Lan is asked if she is named after a character in “Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*,” and she correctly points out that the character in question is called *Mu* Lan, not Wu Lan (38). She thus distinguishes herself from Hua Mu Lan, who according to Chinese folklore was a young woman who dressed up as a man to take her aging father’s place in battle and thus became a symbol of filial piety. Instead, Wu Lan aligns herself with the *wu shi*, an exorcist whose duty is “chasing demons out from the sick” and distressed (62). After learning the true meaning of her name, Wu Lan exorcises the spirit of her dead father, who has been haunting her because she had “secretly longed for his love all those years while pretending not to mind his absence” (172). Realizing that his suicide had “creat[ed] a hole in the universe, a black hole that sucked life into it” (corresponding to the second tone of the character *wu*, which means “without”), Wu Lan is finally able to speak about her father’s death to her new, androgynously named female lover Francis (172). When she does so, “an energy that erupts from within” her momentarily turns Wu Lan into “a writhing creature,” “the snake struggling against herself,” a tortured, rhythmic dance suggesting the third tone of *wu* (168). The physical release and the psychic absence

culminate in Wu Lan's clearer understanding of her mistake (the fourth tone of *wu*) of "being just a listener, a repository for others' stories" as she "set aside [her] feelings and [her] needs in order to do [her] job responsibly" (99). Wu Lan realizes that as a clinical psychologist determined to be detached, she has in fact been instrumentalizing herself, distancing herself from her clients in the same way she distanced herself from her family.

Now that Wu Lan's anxieties regarding her father are "no longer hidden by [her] clients," she finds that in her mind he has become "smaller than the man he had been in [her] younger years" (181–82), and in this diminished state Wu Lan is finally able to lay his ghost to rest: "I coax him towards the bed, lay him down, and lift the sheet up and over him, tucking him in carefully until he is a neat but quivering white form" (180). Seeing her father's ghost objectively as a quivering white form rather than as the stern man of the house he was in life, Wu Lan is able to reevaluate her subjectivity and imagine the possibility of renewed social—rather than biological or filial—relations with her remaining family members: "Will I tell them about Francis? Only if they bother to ask. Only if they stop acting as if I'm a single woman. I want them to ask. Back in bed, I let myself breathe through [Francis's] hair, that veil against which I sense the contours of my own face" (194). The veil of Francis's hair recalls Pierre Bourdieu's remarks that "the literary text will reveal" objective truths "only in veiled terms" and "by means of negation" (158). By negating Wu Lan's initial moment of asserting her subjectivity by escaping from Singapore without regard for the internal fissures resulting from such a hasty self-exile, the novel puts Wu Lan back together again as she begins to sense the contours of her gradually reconstituted self.

Wu Lan also examines her disrupted subjectivity by imagining the lives of Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui, creating in her mind what Axel Honneth calls the objective and antecedent recognition that precedes the instrumentalization of the two women as sex workers. *This Place Called Absence* maps out an alternate, queer genealogy for Wu Lan through the voices of Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui, a genealogy that is objectively rather than biologically or biographically framed because the two prostitutes appear only as names in James Francis Warren's sociological history, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San: Prostitution in Singapore 1870–1940*. Wu Lan imagines an affiliative link between herself and Chow Chat Mui, the *ah ku* who eventually becomes kin to Wu Lan's maternal grandmother and bequeaths the pair of brocade slippers to her. Ah Choi's and Chat Mui's voices are thus more important than "show[ing] the complexities of ah ku life circa 1900" (Rev. 62) or offering "impassioned chronicles of barbaric brothel life and illicit lesbian love" (Haggas 992). By recreating their lives, Wu Lan begins to have an objective understanding of a non-instrumentalized intimacy with another person: as Ah Choi says of her love for Chat Mui, "No one pays us for this pleasure" (58); in Chat Mui's words, "There is a labour that doesn't mark us," a "pleasure of hidden beauty" expressed in "the language of secret desires"

(58). *This Place Called Absence* articulates Wu Lan's voice with those of the two lesbian *ah kus*, in particular that of Chow Chat Mui's. While her lover Ah Choi secretly keeps some of her earnings from her customers in a mattress instead of turning them all over to the owner of the brothel, Chat Mui hoards and makes copies of the Chinese character for deep thought or contemplation, *si*, which she obtains from a gay Peranakan Chinese scholar who eventually saves her life by marrying her and rescuing her from the brothel.

Even though Chat Mui is illiterate, this single character becomes an object with an intense, somatic effect: "The character for thought has become mine, without even education or money. I too can enjoy a word, feel its beauty and peace calm me. . . . A word after all is a thing I touch and see" (Kwa 109). Chat Mui teaches herself to write this character, and the process of copying the character affords her a tranquility that goes beyond her opium-induced stupor or the solace in the arms of her lover Ah Choi: "I remembered that this special word means quiet, inner thought. The thinking of the heart. My brushwork might be poor, but the writing calms me. Even makes the pain retreat into the background for a few moments" (173). Chat Mui writes the character one last time at the grave of Ah Choi, who overdosed on opium after her brothel owner confiscated her secret stash of money, and this last act of writing has a similar effect on Chat Mui as the exploration of the various tones of her name had on Wu Lan: "As I copied out the character, my own heart opened to all the stories I've saved up inside. A field of tears and memories" (178). Ah Choi's hoarding of money eventually destroys her, while Chat Mui's fascination with a single object—the character for contemplation—helps her survive. Chat Mui receives the character as a generous gift from the scholar and copies it diligently while pondering its nuances, and this objective relation finally reunites her with the scholar who eventually helps her escape from a prostitute's life. Just as Chat Mui's heart "opened to all the stories" she had been saving inside her when she writes the character *si* one last time for the departed Ah Choi, in the same way Wu Lan becomes less of a passive listener or a "repository for others' stories" and begins to derive meaning and significance from the words spoken by her clients at her psychology practice: "I'm returning to this place called absence, where in front of me, a stranger talks. Stringing words together. . . . A torrent of words, like a seasonal monsoon, underneath which lies the deepest pain" (208).

What is important about the stories of Ah Choi and Chat Mui is not that they are historically authentic portraits of the *ah kus*' subjectivities but rather that they are entirely fabulous and made up by Wu Lan herself. In order not to be "defeated by their anonymity," Wu Lan confesses, "I've felt compelled to imagine them, Ah Choi and Chat Mui, together. I don't even know for sure if lesbianism existed among the *ah ku* of that time" (163). Wu Lan has taken enormous creative liberty in bringing Ah Choi and Chat Mui to life, not only bringing them out of historical anonymity as mere names in James Francis

Warren's monograph but also turning one of them (Chat Mui) into her own literary and affiliative forebear. Through Ah Choi's and Chat Mui's tragic romance and Chat Mui's fascination with language and writing the novel maps out an alternate and a queer lineage for Wu Lan besides the biopolitically determined line of patrilineal descent. It imagines Wu Lan not so much as an autonomous subject but rather a relational object, "the sum of which is greater than its parts. She [Wu Lan] is neither Ah Choi nor Chat Mui, although they are parts of her. An image seeks itself, the particular truths" (207). In the face of the Singaporean state's resonant directive of harnessing queer subjectivity as a neoliberal technology for the creative industries, *This Place Called Absence* stages a revenant alternative by tactically objectifying both the dead and the living to reconstitute Wu Lan's sense of self in a non-instrumentalized modality.

CONCLUSION

Both *The Harmony Silk Factory* and *This Place Called Absence* evoke a historical moment in Malaysia and Singapore with sensuous detail. This historical authenticity should not be understood as a literary safari but rather an element of what Adorno calls artworks' "longing" to be understood, characterized by "the neediness inscribed as a figure in the historically existing. By retracing this figure, they are not only more than what simply exists but participate in objective truth to the extent that what is in need summons its fulfillment and change" (*Aesthetic Theory* 132). Instead of presenting characters who stand for the fullness of collective and individual subjects interpellated by neoliberal rationality, these two novels trace out their narrators as figures whose participation in the historically rendered world of the novels suggests an objective truth about a different mode of social relations, one that acknowledges the "wanting" or incompleteness of subjects and their potential for fulfillment and change through their antecedent recognition of non-identical objects outside the self's boundaries (*Aesthetic Theory* 133). Confronted by the tenacity of neoliberal technologies of subjectivity and subjection employed by global capital and exceptional states, the novels deploy a tactical objectivism through a literary aesthetics that maps the cultural logic of neoliberal reason as a field of struggle existing alongside a field of force designed for productive efficiency and market optimization.

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