Racial Melancholia: Feeling Backward and Structures of Racial Capitalism

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis seeks to interrogate the ways in which the positionality of Asian Americans as a racial group in the United States has converged with liberal capitalism and other narratives of social upward mobility. This line of inquiry also discusses the simultaneous exploitation of overseas Asian laborers with the rise of globalization. In particular, what follows is concerned with the affective conditions and consequences of such uneven integration, as well as the obfuscated long histories of U.S. imperial intervention and military operations in East and Southeast Asia and their consequent diasporas. In exploring the formations of subjecthood emerging from these relations, this thesis problematizes the weaponization of identity in contemporary multiculturalism and its rhetorics. My analytic framework is anchored by an affective and temporal register, which merges David Eng and Shinhee Han's conceptualization of “racial melancholia” with what Heather Love calls "feeling backward.” I examine Ocean Vuong’s poetry collection, Night Sky with Exit Wounds, Ling Ma’s novel Severance, and the March 16th, 2021 Atlanta spa shootings as my objects of study to contextualize how "feeling backward" attends to the affectation of melancholia in the face of globalization, racial capitalism, and neoliberal multiculturalism.

Abrégé

Ce mémoire a pour objectif d'interroger la convergence du groupe racial des personnes d'origine asiatique aux États-Unis avec le capitalisme libéral et d'autres récits de mobilité sociale ascendante. Il examine également l'exploitation des travailleurs et travailleuses en Asie qui s'avère parallèle à l'essor de la globalisation. Plus précisément, ce travail de recherche s'intéresse aux conditions affectives et aux conséquences causées par cette dichotomie, ainsi que les diasporas qui sont issues d'une longue histoire d'intervention impériale et d'opérations militaires menée et dissimulée par les États-Unis en Asie de l'Est et du Sud-Est. En explorant les manifestations d'assujettissement engendrées par ces rapports, ce mémoire critique la façon dont les discours du multiculturalisme contemporain emploient la notion d'identité afin de manipuler les populations concernées. Je joins la conceptualisation de David Eng et de Shinhee Han de la « mélancolie raciale » à ce que Heather Love considère comme « se sentir en arrière » pour présenter mon analyse d'un point de vue affectif et temporel. Afin de contextualiser la capacité de cette dernière notion à contribuer à l'affectation de la mélancolie dans l'ère de la globalisation, du capitalisme racial et du multiculturalisme néolibéral, j'étudie *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (un recueil de poèmes par Ocean Vuong), *Severance* (un roman par Ling Ma) et les fusillades du 16 mars 2021 dans plusieurs spas à Atlanta.

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I dedicate this project to Christina Yuna Lee and Michelle Alyssa Go.

Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound.

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

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Introduction

This thesis seeks to interrogate the ways in which the positionality of Asian Americans as a racial group in the United States has converged with liberal capital and other narratives of social upward mobility, as well as the simultaneous exploitation of overseas Asian workers with the rise of globalization. In particular, what follows is concerned with the affective conditions and consequences of such integration, with the formation of this subjecthood emerging from long histories of U.S. intervention and military operations in East and Southeast Asia. I ground my analysis with "racial melancholia," a term that David Eng and Shinhee Han that serves as a useful theoretical framework to articulate the social and psychic conditions of the race relations I outline. I suggest that racial melancholia works in tandem with what queer theorist Heather Love refers to as "feeling backward;" by underscoring the value of attending to dark histories that precede present legislative and public discourses of progress. I find that racial melancholia and feeling backward inform each other in useful ways, framing each of my chapters to varying degree.

Love's work in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* is informed by the antisociality of queer negativity, which critiques the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity politics and its attachment to state and mainstream recognition.[1] She writes, "*Feeling Backward* owes a debt to a long tradition of work on queer negativity – to Edelman's *No Future*, and to the work of Leo Bersani, Tim Dean, and Christopher Lane" (Love 22). Lee Edelman, who wrote one of the most prominent arguments for the antisocial thesis, *No Future* (1995) articulates

[1] Leo Bersani in Homos (1995) asks, "Should a homosexual be a good citizen?", and questions "the compatibility with civic service. His work, as well as Lee Edelman's *No Future* has grounded what is referred to as "the antisocial thesis" in contemporary queer theory. Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Harvard University Press, 1996.

a suspicion of the rising acceptance and encouragement of queers to participate in the institution of the family, to reproduce, quite literally, the figure of The Child, who signifies and guarantees the endurance of the American family, and America itself. Edelman calls for a rejection of the false promise of state-sanctioned normative desires, arguing for queers to embrace their antisociality and insist on the disillusionment of these promises. This cultural critique not only questions the teleological model of sexual identity formation and its investments in futurity, but it also makes apparent the affectations that are lost when the queer body is located only in quintessential white liberal subjecthood. Throughout *Feeling Backward*, Love interrogates the temporal dimension of normative queerness beyond the fixed "doneness" with the past that linear politics ascribes.

Love does not exactly insist on a denial of the future, but rather a lingering on the past, what she calls "feeling backward." She writes, "I am more interested in the turn to the past than I am in the refusal of the future itself" (Love 23). It is this insistence on the backward turn that frames this thesis, and while the queer subject and Asian American subject have obviously different political histories and subjectivities, I find that these two positionalities are presently adjacent to one another under the conditions capitalist conditions of the (neo)liberal governance of the United States. Love "focus[es] on the history of queer exclusion from the family as well as from public life, trac[ing] a genealogy of backward figures, acts of negation, and aesthetic practices of refusal" (126). Love's conceptualization of a queer refusal thus acts as a refusal to coalesce with narratives of progress in the U.S. and the incorporation of gays and lesbians in the contemporary mainstream, especially when such integrations pertain to a select population of

queers (cisgendered, white, "homonormative")[2] in a neoliberal state. This recruitment of queers into the state, and subsequently, into institutions of family, capital, and military[3] are embodied proliferations of state-sanctioned economic and racial domination. Though disguised as liberal progress, "'Advances' such as gay marriage and increasing media visibility of well-heeled gays and lesbians threaten to obscure the continuing denigration and dismissal of queer existence" (Love 10). This (uneven) integration of sexual minorities into the mainstream is mirrored by the integration of certain racial minorities into the same modern capitalist order. As such, this thesis interrogates the ways in which Asian Americans have been similarly inscribed, and how a politics of feeling backward might allow room to remember exclusions, stigmatizations, and violences in order to better attend to their ongoing nature. In a time when representational identity politics is shaped by economic exploitations of globalization[clarify], it is important now more than ever to develop "a resistance to the world as it is given" (Love 453).

By attempting to approach Asian American subject formation and its body politic with feeling backward, there is not only a temporal register on which this project operates, but also an affective one. I draw from Eng and Han's work on racial melancholia to describe the affect imbued in my application of feeling backward. Eng and Han write in *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, "Melancholia is temporally extended into *an indefinite future* – it is mourning without end" (25, emphasis mine). Melancholia initially seems to be a ceaseless future-oriented

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[2]Homonormativity is used to refer to the privatizing nature of gay culture, in turn reifying heteronormativity. The term was coined by Lisa Duggan, who describes it as "A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (30). Duggan, Lisa. "The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neoliberalism." *Materializing democracy*. Duke University Press, 2002. 175-194.

[3] See Heather Love's chapter in The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements. Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press.

affect, but put differently, it is an interminable sense of grief. This temporal turn is toward the past, then, and "feeling backward" and its gesture of refusal operate on the same valence. Eng and Han assert that "the refusal to view identities under social erasure as individual pathology or permanent damage lies in the reappropriation of melancholia, its refunctioning as a structure of everyday life" (65). If part of melancholia's condition is perpetuity, the continual accrual of both historical violences and the efforts of liberalism to obscure and forget these vicissitudes necessarily demands a simultaneous feeling backward, a lingering on the past into the future.[4] Lisa Lowe articulates liberalism's obfuscations by tracing its genealogy and describing how the project of modern liberalism is dependent on the abstract promises of freedom, progress, and equality, simultaneously forgetting the global divisions of racial difference upon which such promises are dependent (Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*).

Both melancholia and feeling backward are modes of temporal unresolve; thinking about and through these affectivities together allows room to remember "the multitude of losses an unforgiving social world historically enacts and enables" and incites a vigilance against present discourses of neoliberalism and multiculturalism (Eng & Han 65). Such ideologies are key to processes of racial differentiation for capital accumulation. The differential incorporation of racial minorities into multiculturalism and neoliberal capitalism allows for the global divisions of labor and exploitation in particular countries that generate capital for the Global North. Cedric Robinson, who conceptualized racial capitalism in his 1983 book *Black Marxism*, posits that the development of the modern world has been informed and continues to be shaped by the ways in which racial ideologies and social structures emergent from capitalism mutually inform one

[4] I am drawing from Lisa Lowe's work from *Intimacies of Four Continents* and her configuration of liberal forgetting.

another. Robinson's work helps frame my analysis of the relations specifically between the U.S. and its outsourcing of labor in various parts of Asia for the mass production of goods.

Much like the way Love describes how the consolidation of gays into liberal capital simultaneously continues to exclude extraneous other queers, Asian Americans have also been mobilized in relation to their capacity to generate capital, thus affirming the United States as a land of equal opportunity despite enduring exclusions of impoverished or undocumented Asian Americans. This affirmation in turn "demand(s) a forgetting of these formative losses and exclusions, an enforced psychic amnesia that can return only as a type of repetitive national haunting – a type of negative or absent presence" (Eng & Han 40). I argue for the need to feel "backward," a refusal to disavow the losses and damage the U.S. nation-state seeks to reverse through multiculturalism and liberal discourses such as the model minority stereotype. This figuration embodies the temporality of melancholia extended into an indefinite future, while also disavowing the enduring legacies of institutional indictment Eng and Han explain how the mobilization of the model minority myth operates as "One important melancholic mechanism facilitating the erasure and loss of repressed Asian American identities as well as histories of discrimination and exclusion (41). A refusal to forget these injuries is also a simultaneous insistence that liberal promises and institutional legibility is simply not enough.

This refusal also attends to the ways in which racial minorities are institutionally managed and positioned against one another, in particular the ambiguous positionality of Asian Americans in the Black and white terrain of American racial politics, or what Claire Kim calls "racial triangulation."[5] This dialectic triangulation is especially apparent through the deployment

[5] Kim argues that Asian Americans occupy different group positions "relative to and through interaction" with Black people and white people. See Kim, Claire Jean. "The racial triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics & society* 27.1 (1999): 105-138.

of the model minority myth, which "configures the unequal status of African Americans in US culture and society as a self-inflicted injury," reifying American exceptionalism and its abstractions of individualism (Eng & Han 41). Racial triangulation is thus a manifestation of antagonisms between Asian Americans and Black communities, conducted by the racial dominance of whiteness to distance and estrange minority groups from each other. As such, not only is the model minority myth damaging to Asian American and Asian immigrant groups who do not fit its ideals of prototypical citizenry, it also serves to further stifle solidarity and revolutionary potential amongst non-white racial groups. Asian Americans and Asian immigrants labelled as "illegal immigrants," "yellow peril," or "model minorities" are all "mobilized in relation not only to whiteness but also to blackness and other racial groups comprising US multicultural society in an ever-shifting network of historically contingent social relations" (Eng & Han 16).With the refusal that emerges from "feeling backward," the empty promises of liberal belonging and identity politics (which only serve to reify and affirm the state) become apparent, which then begs the question of how we might think through melancholia to give language to loss and grief in ways that may not be "fully reconcilable to the vocabulary of social formation of ideology" (x Cheng).

This thesis examines three primary objects of study: poems from Ocean Vuong's poetry collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds,* Ling Ma's novel *Severance,* and the Atlanta spa shootings.[6] I use Vuong's poems in an effort to illustrate what a practice of "feeling backward" can look like, illuminating the political utility of this temporal orientation through Vuong's prose. I close read passages from *Severance,* which offers a nuanced narrative of late-stage

[6] The Atlanta spa shootings refer to the series of murders in the greater Atlanta area in March 2021. Georgia massage parlor shootings leave 8 dead; man captured | AP News

capitalism, to demonstrate how global labor relations shape the American social fabric and its subjects under the totality of an accretive sense of time capitalism creates. I interpret a melancholic tone throughout *Severance* as a result of the processes of racialization under capitalist order the novel describes. Finally, this thesis examines the Atlanta spa shootings and its aftermath to situate them within a long history of U.S. imperialism and military intervention in East and Southeast Asia. In so doing, I also interrogate the ways that the public and state response to the shootings overlook this very history in favor of multiculturalist discourse. I suggest that the colorblindness of multiculturalism minimizes the losses of these victims, eliciting the unresolved grief of the melancholic subject.

Chapter One will discuss Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, his first full-length poetry collection, as a meditation on time and memory in relation to what Lisa Lowe, borrowing from Raymond Williams, calls the "residual."[7] In my close reading of his poems, I argue that Vuong's evocation of the ocean as a site of temporal redemption is a gesture of feeling backward in its non-linear prose that attends to the mercurial nature of Vietnamese diaspora. In turn, this analysis engages with Vuong's use of what I refer to as "oceanic media" against the teleological narratives of the Vietnam War as a historical event seen to completion. I suggest that the oceanic and "watery" images woven throughout Vuong's work are a site through which a sense of time that accounts for loss is construed.[8] This chapter examines how Vuong offers alternate narratives

[7] Lisa Lowe uses the term "residual" in The Intimacies of Four Continents, explaining the residual "persists and endures, even if less legible within the obfuscations of a new dominant" (Lowe 20).

[8] My interrogation of the ocean as a site of loss and temporal disorder in Vuong's work is inspired by Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*, in which she beautifully articulates how "the past that is not past reappears, always to rupture the present" in the context of Black life and the afterlives of slavery (9).

of a violent past that resist closure and completion; instead, Vuong creates a space that critiques the telos of time and war by offering an intentionally partial and wanting prose.

By evoking "oceanic media" in his language, Vuong figures the ocean as a spatial mode of an alternate time, one that unsettles linear conceptions of time and history, a "past" that is fully resolved. I draw from Melody Jue's work in *Wild Blue Media* to analyze Vuong's poems as a destabilization of "terrestrial -based ways of knowing," instead reorienting readers toward the epistemology of the ocean itself as a media environment that challenges the saturation of dominant narratives of war and the role of U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia. Vuong's purposeful disorientation is thus not only spatial, but also temporal in its interrogation of periodization of war and its "end."

Sunny Xiang similarly articulates the ongoing-ness of war in her book *Tonal Intelligence*, where she evokes Don Mee Choi's mixed media collection *Hardly War*. Xiang explains her usage of "hardly war" as an analytic approach in describing the cold war and its distinctive qualities of being "fought by a "benevolent" empire pioneered a style of warfare that was deemed unconventional, and it created an experience of wartime that is often quotidian and still ongoing" (Xiang 3)[9]. Alongside Vuong's references to the Vietnam War, Xiang's analysis of the cold war in East and Southeast Asia offers a useful analytic to think through U.S. foreign policy and the discursive regimes of U.S. militarism across the transpacific. Hardly war, as Xiang explains, "helps shift our sights from the obviousness of ruptures to the hardliness of continuity: hardly war is only partly history because it cannot be contained in the past tense" (8). Through

[9] Xiang writes, "I set aside the Cold War for the more open- ended cold war, a typographical convention that I borrow from Heonik Kwon. Where the Cold War is a historical event, the cold war is a historiographic problem… A lower- case cold war is what I think South Korean poet and translator Don Mee Choi has in mind when using the phrase "the hardliest of wars" (3).

Jue and Xiang's work, I demonstrate how Vuong's poems and their temporal disorientations operate on a similar valence. Consequently, I suggest Vuong's language is saturated in a call to "feel backward," referring to Heather Love's work. Vuong's articulation of diaspora and its dispossessions is a reminder that war is often framed as complete historical events in liberal humanist archives as history, but a practice of feeling backward can recognize the loss and residuality that liberalism seeks to obscure.

Chapter Two engages with Ling Ma's novel *Severance* as a meditation on the temporality of racial capitalism and infrastructures of racialized labor as it shapes the American social imaginary. I interpret the novel's narration as imbued with a melancholic affect, demonstrating how the iterative temporal "smoothing" of capitalism shapes melancholia as "an integral part of daily existence and survival" (Eng & Han 61). *Severance* follows the unfolding of a global pandemic and those who remain that survive the slow apocalypse. This narration is interspersed with Candace's recollections, which make up a patchwork of her life and immigration to the U.S. as a child, as well as her memories as an adult. Leading up to the pandemic, Candace works at a New York based book production company called Spectra, in the "Bibles department," overseeing production for various orders. Her work takes her to factories in Shenzhen, China, where Spectra outsources their labor and suppliers to fulfill orders. Candace's visits to Shenzhen are complicated by the positionality of her Western privilege and economic mobility granted by her employer who simultaneously exploits other racialized laborers overseas. I close read such passages to demonstrate how globalization and modern capitalism operate through racial particularity, exploitation, and domination.

I address the affective consequences of these relations by reading an undercurrent of melancholia in the novel, which I suggest also manifests through the dominant order of capitalist

time and the fuel economy that structures quotidian life. I draw extensively from Eng and Han's work on racial melancholia "as a privileged psychic mechanism for evaluating histories of interminable loss, grief and exclusion associated with everyday processes of immigration, assimilation, and racialization" (22). I demonstrate how *Severance* attends to the connections between racial melancholia and racial capitalism, a term coined by Cedric Robinson. Robinson's conceptualization of racial capitalism is to recognize that capital only accumulates by constructing and mobilizing relations of inequality and exploitation among racial groups despite the rhetoric of inclusivity deployed by liberalism and multiculturalism. By examining the ways in which these relations manifest in the novel, I suggest that the overseas Asian laborer and the Asian American model minority worker are both indicative of the ways in which they flexibly fit the needs of the dominant capital world order of economic productivity and efficiency. These subject formations are consequently what Eng and Han describe as "figure(s) without history… with no past, present, or future, the robot is not only about efficiency without sex but also outside lived histories of oppression – that is, outside histories of institutionalized racism" (Eng & Han 157-158). I read the atemporal nature of Asian subjectivity as aligned with the linear teleological of racial capitalism, and the inevitable melancholia that emerges from these relations.

My third chapter examines the Atlanta spa shootings that occurred on March 16th, 2021, in which six of the eight victims were Asian women. This chapter attempts to situate these murders within a larger context of the history of gendered orientalism and Asian American disposability in the United States. I discuss the ways in which the shifting figure of the "Asian" has served to fit the needs of the American empire, and in shaping American nationhood and identification. Drawing from Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, I explain how orientalism refers not necessarily a particular place, but a steeped public imaginary that supports

a Western imperialist agenda. By contextualizing the Atlanta spa shootings within these relations of power, this chapter illustrates how the Atlanta spa shootings are not an individual, random act of violence, but a part of a larger gendered orientalism and the sexualization of Asian women from entrenched histories of U.S. military presence in East and Southeast Asia.

Further, this chapter troubles the ways in which the American "postracial" era deploys mechanisms of neoliberal multiculturalism to indicate that the Atlanta spa shooting was the result of one unstable man with a gun, rather than a symptom of the larger relations of gendered orientalism and the history of Asian women as a disposable source of transnational labor. I refer to Jodi Melamed's work to explain how the U.S. promotes the idea of a racially inclusive national culture of equal opportunity, and how multiculturalism is deployed by the state to manage the conceptualization of race be affixing antiracism to state policy and ideas of "diversity," simultaneously protecting global capitalism. Subsequently, I interrogate how ideals of multiculturalism saturate the public discursive responses to the shooting, examining the hashtags #StopAsianHate, as well as the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act that the Biden administration passed in May of 2021. By tracing President Biden's speech regarding the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act as well as its actual content, I demonstrate how such legislation elides how the origins of perpetuation of Asian "hate" are state-sponsored, attending to the language Biden uses to affirm the American exceptionalism and the U.S. as a nation of diversity and tolerance. In so doing, I also illustrate how hate crime legislation affirms and continues to fund the state's carceral reach, which not only disproportionately incarcerates Black people, but also deepens divides amongst racial minorities.

Chapter One: Oceanic Temporality and Backward Feeling in Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*

Throughout his collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong engages with alternate non-linear temporalities, using what I refer to as "oceanic media"[10] to (dis)orient the reader and create a particular embodied sense of diasporic time and self. I will discuss poems that best demonstrate the temporal (il)logics of oceanic media following John Durham Peters' suggestion in his book *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* that "The old idea that media are environments can be flipped: environments are also media" (Peters 3). Keeping with this sentiment, I argue that oceanic media can be understood as such, as a vessel that carries and communicates meaning. Oceanic media throughout this chapter will refer to an assembly of oceanic imageries and metaphors Vuong uses in his poetic language that work to evoke the slipperiness of non-linear temporality. I close read these themes in the poems, "Untitled (Blue, Green, and Brown): oil on canvas: Mark Rothoko: 1952," "Immigrant Haibun," "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," "Telemachus," and "To My Father / To My Future Son" respectively. These poems are profoundly imbued with the legacies of U.S. imperialist intervention in Vietnam; Vuong offers an alternative way of remembering and reconstructing this past that refuses to disavow these violences[11], simultaneously demonstrating their ongoing nature. In so doing, I refer to Sunny Xiang's work regarding what she calls "hardly war" in her book *Tonal Intelligence*, where she interrogates the American cold war in Asia to examine wartime and its

[10] My usage of the term "oceanic media" is inspired by Melody Jue's work in *Wild Blue Media*, where she writes, "I think of the ocean as a natural environment for science fiction, estranging our terrestrial perspectives on space, life, and normativity in relation to the specificity of seawater – a locus for situated knowledge" (9).

[11] I pluralize violence throughout this chapter in reference to the multiplicity of violence that war and occupation brings.

aftermaths. I make connections among "hardly war," historical materialism, and oceanic media to demonstrate Vuong's attempts to articulate an alternate consideration of war and the shaping of a melancholic subjecthood. What follows is also informed by Melody Jue's work in *Wild Blue Media*, in which she explains how "the ocean provides an estrangement effect on terrestrial conceptions of media and mediation, providing a new set of environmental circumstances under which to consider their efficacy" (Jue 7-8). Through the integration of elemental media, Vuong creates a space that critiques the telos of time and history, putting forth oceanic media as a generative site to consider alternate modes of temporality and subjectivity.

A Brief Biography of Ocean Vuong

Ocean Vuong is a queer first generation Vietnamese-American writer and poet, born in Sài Gòn. His work is contextualized in themes of war, diaspora, memory, and desire. His mother was the daughter of an American soldier; his family was not simply survivors of Vietnam war and its aftermath, but Vuong himself is a direct product of it: he "[was] literally born because of that war.[12]" Vuong was also the first in his family to learn to read, at age eleven. He would later earn his B.A. in English at Brooklyn College and his M.F.A. at NYU. Vuong was profoundly influenced by his maternal family members and their storytelling, and explains that his literary techniques and narrative style were learned from the ways in which his mother, grandmother, and aunt "would tell stories to recalibrate their past, to make sense of their past."[13] His work and the embodied nature of his language reflects the maternal storytelling of his family, an effort to

[13] "Ocean Vuong A Life Worthy of Our Breath." Interview by Krista Tippett. *On Being*. 30 Mar. 2020. Web. 27 Nov. 2020.

make sense of the past by redressing its ostensible coherency. Oceanic media is vital to this destabilization and (dis)orientation, creating space to recalibrate the past, as it were.

The context from which Vuong writes is one that interrogates the American mythos of domination and destruction. In 1990, when Vuong was 2 years old, his family fled Vietnam as refugees, relocating in Hartford, Connecticut. Vuong's very existence, and childhood, was profoundly shaped by war and violence. After *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* was published with positive critical reception and public success, it was suggested to Vuong that he write on other themes besides war, diaspora, immigration, and queerness. But to Vuong, writing about (from, and through) these topics are "integral to understanding American identity," not merely his personal background. He strives to create a space that helps fill gaps of American "history;" Vuong was taught in a public school in Connecticut that the Vietnam War was just "Something bad [that] happened over there; anyway, it's over… We went on to the Gulf War, when we were heroes again." Vuong's work is an effort to subvert this teleological narrative, and instead, interrogate the underbelly of it, asserting a different temporal framework to create moments that salvage and preserve bodies from the past. Sunny Xiang's reading of the cold war in Asia makes this especially apparent, as she characterizes it "as a perpetual structure that became, and continues to be, a perceptual problem: this is a war that often passes as 'governance' and that sometimes looks like 'peace'" (Xiang 236). This analytic approach captures the malleable ways in which war is represented and remembered. Ray Chow in *The Age of the World Target* specifically asserts this point regarding the contradicting nature of U.S. imperialism, explaining that "The pursuit of war – with its use of violence – and the pursuit of peace – with its cultivation of knowledge – are the obverse and reverse of the same coin" (Chow 38). The thinly veiled duality that Chow points out here demonstrates how Xiang conceptualizes "hardly war" and

war's conception of time. She critiques an understanding of war as temporally bound and treated as "hardened" events in history:

> *Instead of using war to measure time*— instead of assuming that antebellum America, post45 literature, and post– cold war geopolitics have self-evident meaning— this book has contemplated how we measure war. To be sure, we already have many ways to measure war: casualties, territories, supplies, and public opinion are to gauge winning and losing; officially conferred medals and reparations can presumably calculate valor and injury. These metrics are in the end unsatisfying and misguided, I've argued, because they operate on a mischaracterization of war (Xiang 236, emphasis mine).

This mischaracterization is precisely what Vuong attempts to interrogate, calling attention to the ways in which war is used to measure time through the temporal ambiguities in his poems.

Vuong allows the reader to bear witness to these contradictions, and so too the violences that created the conditions under which he was born, as a Vietnamese-American and self-declared pacifist and practicing Buddhist. He negotiates the tensions of his positionality by challenging dominant narratives of linear temporality, resisting teleological coherence to elicit alternate modes of time and history. Oceanic media is used throughout *Night Sky* to demonstrate how experiences and memories of war and diaspora cannot be reduced to rigid measurements of time, and in fact exceed hegemonic temporal logics. I argue that Vuong conceptualizes the Vietnam War and its diasporas as interminable events, attending to Xiang's assertion of "hardly war." Turning to Don Mee Choi's mixed media collection *Hardly War,* Xiang uses the term "hardly war" because "the modifier hardly strains for greater precision yet obscures action, agency, and accountability. Its ostentatious exhibition of inconspicuousness and powerlessness work to elongate the action of war, including a temporal disorientation…This formulation thematizes war's lack of origin and resolution" (Xiang 5). Vuong's work thus makes apparent the "hardliness" of war, and his oceanic imagery is not only a spatial site of disorientation, but also a temporal one.

Organizing and Disorganizing Time Through Elemental Media

The evocations of alternate modes of temporality throughout *Night Sky* contrast sharply with the allusions of military technologies that permeate Vuong's poems. These weaponries rely on extreme temporal precision, they operate on momentary measures of time, for bombs to drop, missiles to detonate, shots to fire. In "Untitled (Blue, Green, and Brown): oil on canvas: Mark Rothko: 1952," Vuong intersperses images of 9/11, maintaining partial allusions to the event, but never naming it. When the poem begins with the line, "The TV said the planes have hit the buildings," the reader knows what this phrase is referring to, allowing Vuong to situate the reader in a particular time and place without speaking directly to it. 9/11 was an event that profoundly shifted American experience, politics, rhetoric, and subjecthood – particularly surrounding perceived foreigners and "Others" of different racial categories. The poem continues with a rumination of the relationship that forms between the speaker's subjectivity and images of the sky, all the while framed by "the planes." In his book *The Marvelous Clouds,* John Durham Peters notes the historical continuities of the sky being used as time-keeping media and thus as an organizational and orientational media. He explains that sky media – "these logistical media – so fundamental that they sometimes are not seen as media at all – negotiate heaven and earth, nature and culture, cosmic and social organization and define our basic orientation to time and also to space" (176). Vuong refers to the sky in this poem to demonstrate how it profoundly shape the ways in which we understand temporal and spatial infallibilities.

Vuong undermines the absolute knowledge that sky media is perceived to convey, providing a counter-narrative that questions certain orientations we are taught. His poem continues:

> How we live like water: wetting
> a new tongue with no telling
> what we've been through. They say the sky is blue
> but I know it's black seen through too much distance (Vuong 8-11).

Vuong is juxtaposing elemental media here – there is an enduring quality to water in his language, living "like water: wetting," despite "what we've been through." The "new tongue" here is a product of diaspora, of wrestling with the unfamiliarity of the English language, with the reference to water being the Pacific Ocean, the body of water that Vuong is named after.[14] Water operates as a medium that keeps secrets, that refuses pastness and reconciliation. Oceanic media is an embodiment of a reticent resilience, media that disrupts and unsettles the telos of particular narratives of time and history, a "past" that is articulated as fully resolved. Enacting what Jue might call thinking through the ocean, Vuong attends to "the ocean as an environment of interpretation" (Jue 17). Living "like water," then, is an embodied interpretation of an alternate time and memory that attends to the irreconcilability of the past.

The "they" pronoun that Vuong subsequently uses alludes to the omnipotent authority we have learned from and internalized. "They say the sky is blue," is a metaphor of how the dominant narrative subsumes alternate possibilities and creates a misrepresented history. The next line, "but I know it's black seen through too much distance," is an utterance of a refusal, countering the reality of the blueness of the sky with an alternate logistical framework. Here, sky media here is referred as a framework of logic, "the sky is blue" is framed as a universal truth. The speaker asserts a divergent claim to knowledge, and his use of the personal pronoun "I" speaks to the validity of personal knowledge, of personal truth, producing a new orientation

[14] Upon learning the word ocean, "the body of water that touches many countries – including Vietnam and the United States," Vuong's mother renamed him Ocean. Vuong often refers self-reflexively to his name in his poems. Read more at How a Poet Named Ocean Means to Fix the English Language | The New Yorker

against this organizational media that is a part of a circuit of power and authority, maintained through deterministic logics.

Narratives of progress and freedom are woven into the fabric of liberal settler culture. Lisa Lowe, in *Intimacies of Four Continents*, calls these narratives "an archive of liberalism," which obscures and silences histories of violences. This silencing also simultaneously enables and privileges liberal humanist logics, of history told by dominant. Lowe explains that these violences are "imbricated processes not sequential events; they are ongoing and continuous in our contemporary moment" (Lowe 7). Vuong evokes this *ongoingness* in his refusal to cohere to a linear sense of time, using elemental media and a non-linear narrative style of writing throughout his works. These alternate modes of temporality also have important relations to memory. "Untitled" continues with the next line: "You will always remember what you were doing when it hurts the most" (12-13). The act of remembering is also an act of resistance against the telos of liberal humanist archives of history. By *remembering* what is obscured, silenced, or "resolved," Vuong is also enacting what Lowe identifies as "residual." Lowe explains that the residual "persists and endures, even if less legible within the obfuscations of a new dominant" (Lowe 20). Dispossession and diaspora are continual throughout time despite being framed within complete events - resonances and ripples continue in new political and social configurations. To remember is to endure, to resist dominant narratives that elide the complex negotiations of archival histories.

"Immigrant Haibun" from *Night Sky* is another meditation on temporality and memory, where oceanic media plays a more significant role. The poem opens with the line "Then, as if breathing, the sea swelled beneath us" (*Night Sky* 14). The sea is described with sublimity; there is a certain tension between the sea being at once unknowable and intimately familiar. Vuong

evokes and teases this tension from the very beginning of the poem, imbuing the sea with motion and breath. As John Durham Peters explains, "Breath implies life, respiration, as mere air does not" (179). By saturating the ocean with life, as a vital entity in of itself, the poem emphasizes that the breathing, living lives on the boat are also suspended in precarity in their own mortality. The speaker explains this sense of disorientation within the water and its boundless nature as the stanza continues, evoking a disorienting sense of time at sea in its immeasurability to human senses:

> If you must know anything, know that the hardest task is to live only once... He lay beside me and placed a word on the nape of my neck, where it melted into a bead of whiskey. Gold rust down my back. We had been sailing for months. Salt in our sentences. We had been sailing – but the edge of the world was nowhere in sight. (Vuong 14)

Legible temporal orientations are lost within this unfathomable spatiality – the ocean becomes a medium that simultaneously holds the past, present, and future, but without a legible sequence of events. To "know that the hardest task is to live only once" is an urging to live without abandonment of the past, to continuously attend to the *residual*, as it were. The phrase, "Salt in our sentences" is a textural representation of a literal residuality, one that can be felt in an embodied manner. This oceanic residuality also speaks to Heather Love's theorization of "feeling backward" and her argument for the need to critique the contemporary phenomenon of queers being integrated into the mainstream, advocating instead for a *turn backward* to consider how histories of exclusion continue to perpetuate despite policies of gay assimilation.[15] "To live only once" is a similar refusal to disavow the past, to recognize the continuities of the past as it

[15] I will return to Love's work in the following section.

resonates and manifests throughout a lifetime. The ocean functions as an archival time-keeping media that challenges a teleological organization of time and history.

Vuong demonstrates through the vast mutable nature of the ocean that oceanic media can be understood as a site that allows us to consider multiple temporalities at once. He draws particular attention to non-linear temporality, demonstrating that the ocean itself is a mediation of time that challenges homogenous ways of time-keeping and history.
The disconcerting nature in which the ocean is imagined in this poem points toward an alternate orientation of time, and consequently, of knowledge production. The oceanic imaginary is shaped by Vuong's unsettling of normative, homogenous constructions of time. In so doing, Vuong plays with tensions of impossibilities, such as "Gold rust[ing] down [the speaker's] back" (14). The properties of true gold allow gold to be immune to time, salt water, and oxygen exposure.[16] Gold is the most non-reactive of metals and is very robust; rust usually occurs in metals that are exposed to oxygen and moisture for a long period of time. As such, the image of gold rusting plays into Vuong's evocation of temporality and perception at sea – Vuong elicits the idea of the impossible corrosion of gold, its "rust" running down from the nape of the neck down the back. This impossibility points to an embodied sensation of the passage of time and the body's relations to the sea and earth; these material and embodied entanglements reflect the residuality of colonial and imperial temporality.

A similar point of tension that Vuong brings forth to describe temporal disorganization and disorientation is apparent in the line, "We had been sailing – but the edge of the world was nowhere in sight" ("Immigrant Haibun" 14). The imagery of the absence of horizon here not

[16] "Gold is the most non-reactive of all metals and is benign in all natural and industrial environments. Gold never reacts with oxygen (one of the most active elements), which means it will not rust or tarnish," according to https://metallurgyfordummies.com/how-does-gold-corrode.html

only reiterates how sky media is a referent for temporal and spatial assurance, but also how the ocean's obscurity destabilizes this certitude of the known world. Being at sea disorients one's sense of the world, and the "edge" of it being nowhere in sight gestures to the world itself as indistinct and unrealized. This line in particular sets a melancholic tone to the poem, evoking a kind of temporal "stuckness" that shapes the conditions of the melancholic subject. As Freud notes, melancholia is interminable in nature because the significance of the lost object continues to be intelligible and unapparent.[17] As such, this oceanic media not only helps sets the melancholic tone of the poem, but is imbued with melancholia itself.

In his poem "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," Vuong uses his own name both as a site of self-reflexivity and as the media through which he articulates potentialities that lie within alternate modes of temporality that unsettle circumscribed narratives. By referring to himself[18], Vuong emphasizes the personal, how the personal is generational, and is thus carried through time. His affective language not only refuses a sense of pastness and reconciliation, but also reassures that doing so will not render the possibilities of the future hopeless. The poem begins,

> "Ocean, don't be afraid.
> The end of the road is so far ahead it is already behind us.
> Don't worry. Your father is only your father
> until one of you forgets" (Ocean 82).

The speaker, which could arguably be assumed as Vuong himself, urges him(self) not to fear, to not be afraid of what is coming. Temporally speaking, the end of the road is the future, but "it is

17 Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and melancholia." The Psychoanalytic Review (1913-1957) 11 (1924): 77.

[18] To avoid confusion, henceforth I will use "Vuong" to refer to Ocean Vuong as the writer of the poem and "Ocean" to refer to Ocean Vuong as a subject in this poem.

already behind us" (emphasis mine). Vuong disorients time, the time spent getting to the end of a road, insisting that Ocean already knows what the future can hold because the past is not past; it is with him still. Put differently, the future is not simply a moment in time, but it rather many moments in time, moments that Ocean has already experienced. Vuong tells Ocean to take comfort in this, to not worry. The experience of time – *memory* – is emphasized throughout the poem through the affective dimensions of mutable temporality. The speaker encourages Ocean to remember, and to remember is to rely on the embodied sensation of a moment of time, residing in one's interiority. Ocean's name here resonates with its likeness to the media that Vuong speaks to (and through) across his poems, like in "Untitled" and "Immigrant Haibun." Oceanic media mediates the hegemonic "sequence" of time by disrupting it – but in "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," Vuong also refers to himself, "Ocean, are you listening?" (8-9), suggesting that he himself (with the dual referent of "ocean"), contains an alternate temporality, a temporality that brings his past and his family's past, as part of the unabridged present. Tao Leigh Goffe notes the materialization of this sort of residuality in "Guano in Their Destiny": Race, Geology, and a Philosophy of Indenture," in which she examines the literal erosion of Chinese indentured labor in the landscape of the Americas, a process she calls "racial sedimentation." In contending with these archival traces in the elemental media of guano, she also notes the "poetic meditation on the submerged… It is said that if you look at the sea long enough scenes from the past come back to life. It is said that 'the sea is history'" (Goffe 44). The ocean to Goffe is a site that contains layers of history, accounting for histories that have been left behind or forgotten in established accounts of the past. Much like Goffe, Melody Jue understands the ocean as containing specific connections to the past that have otherwise been buried/submerged in both

figuratively and literally. In this way, I interpret (the) Ocean in Vuong's poem acting as both the embodied self and a meditation on oceanic media.

This reference to selfhood continues throughout the poem. In another line, Vuong writes, "Just call it *horizon* & you'll never reach it." Like "the road," the horizon is an image that conjures the future, a time that is not yet here. To never reach the horizon is to reorient and produce a counter narrative to a predictive future that relies on a resolved past. Vuong offers an approach to thinking about temporality that eludes uniformity and regularity, that resists the reification of a progressive organization of time. This particular poem pays particular attention to the individual embodied experience of time and memory, memory being the residual narratives of colonial and imperial violences that dominant configurations of history and archive fail to adequately acknowledge. In turn, this omission demonstrates how historical violences are perpetuated by rendering them "in the past" and resolved. In one of the closing lines of the poem, the speaker tells Ocean that "The most beautiful part of your body is where it's headed," an embodied reminder that the body takes the past with it and remembers it despite spatial or temporal displacement.

Feeling Backward Through Oceanic Time & Historical Materialism

In "Telemachus," Vuong evokes the precarities of dispossession through the temporal disorientation of the water, utilizing a father-son relationship to demonstrate loss not only in terms of physical death, but also an ambivalent sense of lost self through this death. In so doing, this poem illustrates how Eng and Han, quoting Freud, explain how "The melancholic "knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him" (qtd. in Eng & Han 3). The loss of the object -

the father - is apparent, but what the loss signifies is not. Vuong opens the poem by imbuing the sea with an almost other-worldly quality:

> Like any good son, I pull my father out
> of the water, drag him by his hair
>
> through white sand, his knuckles carving a trail
> the waves rush in to erase" (Vuong 1-4).

The speaker's point of view of pulling his father, dragging him, from the sea depicts a peculiar reticence, whether it be from the body itself, or the water it is taken from. Later, the speaker describes,

> …I kneel beside him to see how far
>
> I might sink. *Do you know who I am,*
> *Ba?* (Vuong 8-10, emphasis in original).

The question that the speaker asks, "Do you know who I am?" is addressed to his father (Ba), but as the line break severs the (dead) subject for who the question is for, so too is the question directed at himself. The unanswerable question the speaker asks gestures towards a loss beyond the body that is dragged out, one that is indicative of the negotiations of selfhood and what it constitutes.

Psychoanalytically, "knowing" yourself is the dilemma of grappling with being born into a world in which language precedes us, and the ways in which these symbolic representations

frame our subjecthood and recognition of self.[19] The unanswerable question the speaker asks indicates that the signified exceeds the signifier, and thus, in the context of the poem, gestures to the opacity of the self. If the answer to the question of "Do you know who I am?" never comes, the loss that is described here is unknowable. As Eng and Han describe, "the significance of the lost object remains unconscious and opaque" (38). However, that stanza continues:

> …But the answer never comes. The answer
>
> is the bullet hole in his back, brimming
> with sea water. He is so still I think
>
> He could be anyone's father, found
> The way a green bottle might appear
>
> At a boy's feet containing
> a year he has never touched. (12-16).

The answer never comes, and yet the answer is also the bullet hole in the body, filled with "seawater." The seawater is the "answer" to the self-reflexive question, "Do you know who I am?" Oceanic media, as argued thus far, signifies a temporal disorientation, one that allows for the possibility of a "past" that is never fully resolved. The bullet hole "brimming with seawater," then, simultaneously affirms that the question is unanswerable and demonstrates the always-

[19] The Symbolic Order that is referenced here is Jacques Lacan's theory: "Psychoanalysis teaches us that the dyadic deadlock of the imaginary domain – you versus me, black versus white – is resolved and subsumed into the symbolic realm only through an analytic third, through symbolization, triangulation, and the emergence of proper social relations" (Eng & Han 16).

exceeding nature of the ocean as a medium of alternate modes of time, and consequently, of knowledge. As Jue argues, "Seawater changes how we think about the porosity of embodiment," attending to how the nature of this submersion offers a way to examine terrestrial habits of mediation and perception (Jue 19). If the self cannot be contained into a legible "knowability," the brimming seawater mimics this perpetual incomprehensibility of what exactly is lost, to return again to the melancholic knowing whom he has lost, but not *what* he has lost in him.

The poem closes with these last few couplets:

…No use. I turn him
Over. To face it. The cathedral

in his sea-black eyes. The face
not mine – but one I will wear

to kiss my lovers good-night:
the way I seal my father's lips

with my own & begin
the faithful work of drowning (Vuong 17-24).

These lines not only evoke the "interminable sadness of the melancholic, as Eng and Han describe, but can also be interpreted as a turn to the sea, a medium through which time, in the sense of its historicism, is illegible. Walter Benjamin, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," critiques historicism's insistence of the past as sequential, describing, "Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history," and

"[tells] the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" (Benjamin, 263). Benjamin instead advocates for a historical materialist perspective, explaining,

> …Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably…To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to be singled out of history at a moment of danger (Benjamin 255).

Oceanic media, then, in its refusal of historicism, can be interpreted as a medium of historical materialism. The "faithful work" of drowning makes apparent the attempt to participate in an understanding of time that is not merely additive as a course of history, but one that resists that totalizing narrative. As such, the speaker in "Telemachus" who understands the *work* of submitting oneself to the sea "regards it as his task to brush history against the grain" (Benjamin, 257).

Walter Benjamin's articulation of historical materialism runs parallel to Heather Love's method of "feeling backward." Indeed, Love references Benjamin's "angel of history" as a "preeminently backward figure, an emblem of resistance to the forward march of progress" (Love 148).[20] Importantly, Love notes that Benjamin's insistence on looking back means taking seriously the hurt of the past and attending to its damages - the willingness to subject oneself to the potential of drowning, to return to the poem. What is at stake in this oceanic backwardness is

[20] In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin describes a painting named "Angelus Novus," which inspired his figure of "the angel of history," whose "face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls It in front of his feet. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while a pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (257-258). Thus, the angel of history embodies the melancholic view of historical process as an unceasing cycle of despair: Angelus Novus | The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (imj.org.il)

ironically a question also of futurism; critics of the angel of history and politics of feeling backward point toward a latency of political agency. However, the refusal that Love evokes in backwardness is precisely a lesson on how to navigate the future: by incorporating the vision of the past and challenging a progressivist view of history. This is the call the Vuong closes with in "Telemachus" and the speaker's backward turn to the sea.

In "To My Father / To My Future Son," Vuong continues this thematic thread of temporal disorientation, but connects the past and future in a way that may not be as apparent in "Telemachus." The title itself demonstrates this connection between the past and future, and not one that is sequential; the use of the backward slash indicates the interchangeability of "To My Father" and "To My Future Son," indicating that what follows addresses both the speaker's father and son, the future and the past. In particular, the son here could arguably represent what Lee Edelman argues against in his renowned *No Future.* In *No Future,* the oft-referenced text in queer studies, Edelman urges queers to embrace their status outside the social and political order.[21] He argues that the figure of The Child represents a future in which queers are folded into hegemonic desires that perpetuate themselves that they have previously been excluded from, the framework of "reproductive futurism." By collapsing the son and the father in the title, Vuong does not quite reject futurity in the way Edelman urges, nor does he insist on lingering entirely in the past; only by attending to "brush[ing] history against the grain" can a future be conceptualized beyond the bribes of futurity and its disavowals.

The poem's epigraph, "The stars are not hereditary" (from Emily Dickinson), is also evocative of this ambiguity, gesturing again toward the backwardness of historical materialism

[21] This is also referred to as the antisocial theory in queer studies.

as outlined above. Benjamin describes the historian who posthumously understands the past as a sequence of events like "beads of a rosary," but argues that a historical materialist perspective "grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (Benjamin 263). Dickinson asserting that the stars are not hereditary speaks directly this historical materialist sentiment and its grasp of the construction of history. In other words, the historical materialist observes the history that historicism (the history of cultural treasures and victors) disregards. As such, the short but powerful declaration of "the stars are not hereditary" is to refuse to cohere to the idea that the present moment of the world is imbued with a genealogical teleology. Those who might believe in the stars being hereditary benefit from the linear, totalizing logic of a progressivist account of history that those like Emily Dickinson, Walter Benjamin, and Heather Love warn against in their writings.

The poem describes a similar tension in terms of its temporal references and the speaker's sense of urgency. Formatted in a disarray of lines instead of neat stanza, the poem also visually matches the temporal disorientation the content evokes, reminiscent of waves crashing and receding, lines moving back and forth across the page:

> Yes, you have a country.
> Someday, they will find it
> while searching for lost ships... (Vuong 8-10)

Again, using this watery imagery, Vuong demonstrates what the ocean is able to hold and evoke that land-based temporality and knowledge production could not. As Jue suggests, "Seawater asks us to re-think terrestrial notions of the archive or database as informed by the language of earth and sediment" (32). Jue is referring to the quite literal information storages on land and soil, but there is something to be said about how the ocean is often figured as obscure and

unknowable. Perhaps it is this kind of mediation that allows for alternate modes of knowledge and history that are either flattened or forgotten in the telos of terrestrial time.

Later in the poem, the speaker directs his father/son on what to do when they "arrive," though it is unclear where the reference of "there" is:

> If you get there before me, if you think
> of nothing
> & my face appears rippling
> like a torn flag — turn back.
> Turn back & find the book I left
> for us, filled
> with all the colors of the sky
> forgotten by gravediggers
> Use it. (Vuong 40-48)

Here, the speaker urges his father/son to "turn back," in perpetuity it seems, because he does not indicate how his father/son knows when or where they have arrived. The ambiguity of the phrase "If you get there before me," speaks to both a spatial and temporal illusion to the future, and the place that their future is located. The speaker's insistence that they "turn back," then, is one that makes explicit that they are not to forget the past, and to turn back while moving forward is the only way to make sense of the future. Turning back, of course, is what Heather Love advocates for in her call to feel backward. Keeping with an anti-historicist historical imagination, Love describes the way that "identifications across time do not serve merely to consolidate identities in the present; instead, such identifications can illuminate the uncanny life of the past inside our present" (Love 45). This sentiment is woven into Vuong's poems as he negotiates the tensions of the past in our present and future by treating otherwise homogenous "time" in a shuffled,

unfamiliar manner, evoking the wateriness of oceanic media. As Love suggests, “Given the ruination to which history’s others are subject, we need to recognize and even affirm forms of ruined political subjectivity” (Love 71). Vuong simultaneously makes this affirmation at the same time he creates its form.

Through close readings of Vuong’s poems from *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, this chapter articulates oceanic backwardness in attempt to draw connections amongst oceanic media, feeling backward, and historical materialism. Saturated in these arguments, melancholia provides a tonal lens through which these poems can be better illuminated. While Vuong leans into a particular indeterminateness in his language as described, this ambiguity simultaneously indicates the fragmentary nature of an ostensibly whole and coherent past, and gestures toward what is left wanting in the world as it is given.

Chapter Two: Melancholic (Collapse of) Infrastructures of Racial Capitalism in Ling Ma's *Severance*

This chapter examines racialized labor as it shapes American infrastructures and social imaginaries, interrogating how racial capitalism contributes to a totalizing temporality in its iterative and conditional nature. In so doing, I draw connections between these temporal structures and the call to feel backward as attempt to refuse this givenness. I examine Ling Ma's novel, *Severance*, as an understated meditation on racial capitalism in relation to the slippery and heterogenous figure of the "Asian" laborer, both domestically and overseas.[22] My engagement with racial capitalism is in reference to Cedric Robinson's work in *Black Marxism*, where he argues that the development of the modern world has been informed and continues to be shaped by the ways in which racial ideologies and social structures emergent from capitalism mutually inform one another.

Severance makes apparent how our social cultures and the infrastructures that support them are shaped by the detachment and alienation of racialized labor.[23] Anne Anlin Cheng, in her seminal text, *The Melancholy of Race*, attends to this tension, writing that "The history of American national idealism has always been caught in this melancholic bind between incorporation and rejection" (Cheng 10). In turn, this chapter attempts to articulate the embedded

[22] I put "Asian" in quotes to acknowledge the murkiness of the term. As Laura Hyun Yi Kang puts, "When 'Asian' is deployed interchangeably with national designation as often happens in scholarship, it risks eliding such differences and inequalities" (Kang 185). I will use the specifications of "Asia" with countries or designate geographic location as South, East, and Southeast Asias where appropriate.

[23] I use the pronoun "our" to refer specifically to the ways in which the Global North of the western world is fueled by infrastructures of labor and exploitation of resources, which are often extracted at the expense of Indigenous land or populations in the Global South. My use of "our" is also a means to acknowledge my own positionality as a citizen of the Global North and inherent participation in this extractive and exploiting energy cultures.

nature of the structures of racial capitalism and the melancholia that emerges from them, arguing that *Severance* critiques these while simultaneously unsettling them by "feeling backward." In particular, I draw attention to the ways in which the unborn child of the protagonist resists the trope of representing a redeeming future that is typical of the apocalyptic genre. I argue that this resistance gestures toward a refusal to reproduce the past, calling into question the viability and sustainability of social structures and those who would benefit from their perpetuity.

Ling Ma was born in Sanming, Fujian, China during the 1980s and grew up in the Midwest after she immigrated to the U.S. with her parents. Ma initially began writing Severance, her first novel, as a short story while working at Playboy as a fact checker. After she was laid off, Severance became a novel she wrote while living on severance pay.[24] Ma finished the novel while in her MFA program at Cornell and is now an assistant professor of practice in arts at the University of Chicago. Ma said she felt pressured to write a "traditional immigration novel" while at Cornell, explaining,

> I resented that expectation. I had been told, even by a faculty member, to write about 'where you come from' and I was like (expletive). I felt there was this cultural expectation to write about your otherness — to explain yourself. I had grown up mostly in white America and often got asked where I came from. Writing an immigration novel was answering and I wasn't interested. I mean, the apocalypse novel is full of tropes, and so is the immigration novel.[25]

As such, *Severance* is a novel that is partly inextricably about immigration, though one that is told from a perspective of the protagonist Candace Chen, whose ambivalent and unsentimental narration unsettles both the tropes of an immigration novel and a dystopian apocalypse novel.

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[24] Ling Ma's "Severance" Captures the Bleak, Fatalistic Mood of 2018 | The New Yorker

[25] Quoted from an interview in the Chicago Tribune. See more at Chicago author Ling Ma never thought she'd write a zombie apocalypse novel. Here's what changed her mind. - Chicago Tribune

The novel follows the unfolding of a global pandemic through Candace, who had been working in New York City in the Bibles department of a book production company leading up to and during the early stages of the pandemic. The infection that spurs the pandemic is referred to as the "Shen Fever" and is contracted "by breathing in microscopic fungal spores" (Ma 148). Early stages of Shen Fever are difficult to detect, but later stage symptoms include "signs of malnourishment, lapse of hygiene, bruising on the skin and impaired motor coordination," and those infected repeat old routines compulsively unconsciously, until deterioration, leading to eventual death (Ma 148). Some are inexplicably immune and survive the spread, living through the slow apocalyptic societal collapse of the United States. Candace is picked up by a group of other survivors who are led in a cult-like manner by a tyrannical man named Bob, who claims to know a safe location he calls "the Facility". While making their way to the Facility, Bob organizes rituals where the group "stalks" houses for supplies, killing any fevered people inside. When they get to the Facility, the group discovers that it is just an abandoned shopping mall in suburban Illinois that Bob grew up close to and co-owned as an adult. Candace is eventually imprisoned in the Facility by Bob due to her rebellious behavior and the discovery of her pregnancy.

What follows is a textual analysis of the how *Severance* makes apparent the relations among capital, racialized labor, and energy infrastructures, and consequently how the novel explores the affective consequences of these global systems of racial exploitation and domination. Patricia Yaeger speaks to the constancy of energy cultures in all literatures, writing, "Since fuel sources hover in the backgrounds of texts, if they speak at all, to pursue an energy unconscious means a commitment to the repressed, the *non-dit*, and to the text as a tissue of contradictions" (Yaeger 310). My analysis focuses on *Severance*'s depiction of energy cultures, through which I interpret

the novel's evocation of racial melancholia that is shaped by the temporal totality of racial capitalism. Specifically, I draw a comparison between fossil fuel energy and racialized labor based on the "thermodynamic model" that Ryan Jobson delineates, which analogizes human labor power to the expenditure of energy. Jobson's argument is an amendment to Andreas Malm's analysis of energy and the ability to transport it, creating the conditions that liberated capital "from the strictures of absolute space" (Jobson 222). Jobson's corrective directs attention to the preceding moment in history in which "the slave is the original expression of human labor as labor power," and thus "race supplies the premise on which certain select classes of labor are appraised from their thermodynamic capacity for work, rather than their material needs and creative potential" (220-221). These connections will be further explicated in the subsequent section of this chapter, "Infrastructures of Racial Capitalism and Stock Labor."

The novel represents the city of New York before the pandemic unfolded as both a source and site of energy and its ceaselessness; a common portrayal for the city that "never sleeps." The energy of the city is figuratively and literally imagined as perpetual and fundamental to its livelihood. As Candace explains, "New York is possibly the only place in which most people have already lived, in some sense, in the public imagination, before they ever arrive" (Ma 9-10). The city in the novel can be understood as a material embodiment of "energy" - energy is given form that manifests through the bustling cityscape and the constant flow of energy circulating throughout the city in such provocative ways woven into the U.S. public imaginary. However, circulation of energy and its infrastructures also intrinsically emerges from and is shaped by institutions and ideations of power. Dominic Boyer writes specifically of these relationalities, stating, "it would be impossible to say where the power of energy ends and that of life begins" (Boyer 27). The Shen Fever pandemic in Ma's novel demonstrates the ways in which

energy is made implicit and woven into the affective experience of potentiality and mobility. The very absence of energy in the face of infrastructural collapse makes apparent its invisible reliance, and at whose expense. Boyer explains what he describes as "energopower" as a genealogy of power that is not only about the management of the population, "but also about the concern that our precious and invisible conduits of fuel and force stay brimming and humming" (Boyer 325). By attending to the energopower present in *Severance* and racialized labor that fuels it, this chapter seeks to demonstrate how these relations shape our subjecthood under a globalist capital regime.

Mobility is an inseparable part of the American image and sentiment of "freedom" and Americans' "right" to it, and this mobility is afforded only by the infrastructures of energopower. This freedom is literally and figuratively fueled by the free market model of capitalism, an implicit assertion throughout the novel. For example, when Candace reminisces her time as a child in the U.S., she describes the ways she and her mother were enthralled by these energy cultures:

> I was six, and had only been in the U.S. for a few months, newly transplanted from Fuzhou. I was still dazed at the variety and surplus of the supermarkets, miles of boxes and bottles lit with fluorescent lighting. Supermarkets were my favorite American thing. Driving was my mother's favorite American thing, and she drove in a very American way: fast, down empty freeways before rush hour, skimming through cathedral canyons and red rock, her long black hair billowing everywhere, like in the movies. Why move to America if you can't drive? she'd say, never breaking her speed as we veered toward exit ramps, stop signs, traffic lights. (Ma 15)

Candace's young fascination with supermarkets and her mother's enchantment with American car culture as new immigrants are both enabled by and tokens of energy cultures that indicate how energopower is woven into the fabric of the American imaginary. These sentimental attachments demonstrate the ways in which energy infrastructures are not so much cultural

artifacts because of their materiality, but rather because of their affective processes and formations of ethno-nationalism. Matthew Huber writes of the making of this particular aesthetic in his book *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*, describing the formation of the vision of the "American life" as a social and economic project, contingent on the materiality of oil production. He explains, "Automobility, and the consumption of oil to fuel it, is much more social than a corporate plot... In other words, we need to see the mass consumption of oil as emerging not only out of narrow elite conspiracies but out of a wider cultural politics of, literally, the meaning, 'life,' how life should be lived, and what constitutes 'the good life'" (Huber 2).

Ma demonstrates this affective sentiment attached to the rise of automobiles in the American consciousness, reiterating driving as an image that reifies the nation as a promise of interconnectedness and modernity through Candace's memory of her mother's "favorite American thing:" driving in a very American way. This American way embodies the sheer potentiality of the energy infrastructures that make up an "American" identity, including open roads, expansive highways, wide landscapes, and a car fueled by oil speeding through all of it and toward a future and sense of "freedom" that only the United States can offer. Petroleum and capital thus shape each other and consequently create the material conditions for a social imaginary from which this American way of life emerged.

Infrastructural Collapse of Racial Capital in Severance

Candace's accounts of her childhood with her mother, and their experience of participating in the American aesthetic shaped by petrocultural infrastructures, are framed alongside the slow collapse of these very infrastructures that Candace experiences in the present

during the Shen Fever pandemic. After attempting to fulfill her work contract but not hearing from her contractors, clients, and eventually her own employer, Candace revives an old photography blog called NY Ghost, documenting New York's abandoned infrastructure. The photos she captures make apparent the ambient quality of an energy unconscious through its very absence.[26] Christina Schwenkel writes about the affective dimensions of energy infrastructure in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, noting that "The seductive promise of infrastructure lies not with its technical performativity alone… nor can the promise be understood only in terms of a civilizing project… there are also important forms of sociality that infrastructures enable that reflect meaningful attachments to the potentiality of technological systems" (Schwenkel 115). Schwenkel attends to how infrastructures generate the affective environment of everyday life, suggesting that this ambience exceeds the technical functionality of infrastructure, such that we must consider infrastructure also has semiotic and aesthetic implications. In agreement with these claims, *Severance* calls attention to how infrastructure not only shapes materiality but also structures our social and cultural relations that make our lives legible and familiar. In one blog post, which she called "No One Rides the MTA anymore," Candace posts photos she took of various subway stations. She describes the eerie affective experience of infrastructure, unmade by its lack of use, and made again into something else:

> One afternoon, I went as far down the Time Square station steps as I could, pushing aside the caution tape, until I reached the water's edge. I raised my iPhone and took pictures. The flash bounced off the floating, waterlogged candy bars and magazines, drowned rats, and all the trash that cluttered up the surface. You couldn't even see the water beneath all the garbage, but standing on the steps, you could hear it, like an enormous animal lapping thirstily. The deeper you tunneled down, the bigger the sound, echoed and magnified by the enclosed space, until this primordial slurp was all that existed (Ma 256).

[26] I use the term "energy unconscious" in reference to my earlier engagement with Patricia Yaeger's work

These wet evocations elicit the ways in which energy is "harnessed," and considers what energy's unharnessing looks like, or rather what infrastructure looks like in the absence of “tamed” energy. The infrastructure becomes reanimated in the absence of the subway's mediated energy, almost a regression back into the earth. The "primoradial slurp" that Candace speaks of is a reminder that infrastructures are only “livened” when fueled, though this goes much unnoticed as in its structuring of quotidian life. Elizabeth Gelber discusses this mediation in the context of the Nigerian oil industry and economy, describing the animalistic nature of extracting oil from the earth. She writes, for example, “Worn and discarded rubber hoses used to transfer crude littered the riverbanks like the entrails of some wounded hydrocarbon beast" (Gelber 276). Gelber's provocative descriptions attend to the ways in which oil and the energy it exudes is almost “tamed” in a way that allows it to be transformed into infrastructure that is legible, much like the electricity that makes the MTA run is invisible and unintelligible from the infrastructure of the subway train itself. The disintegration of the MTA and its subsequent immersion due to the water makes apparent the dual illegibility of energy in its “rawness” that yet also brings life to and makes infrastructures legible.

This reference to the ruin of infrastructure regressing “back” to what was there before is present throughout the novel, an implicit indication that the collapse of capital and its energy infrastructures reflects the simultaneity of the historical dominance of capital and the planet’s destruction. These descriptions demonstrate this reciprocity in Ma’s use of descriptive language and constant reference to the natural world. For instance, while at the Facility one evening when the group goes to bed, Candace notes, “The entire mall is once again submerged in darkness so complete and absolute. It is a primitive darkness. It has always been here, after all the city lights have gone out, carrying its own time with the sun. And as I lie here in a vacuum, it feels like a

miracle that I exist at all" (Ma 226). This absolute darkness that Candace describes is only apparent in the absence of city lights and suggests a different temporal plane that darkness operates on, indicating that the light brought by modernity's electricity created a different temporal schematic. In his chapter "Off the Grid," Jamie Cross interrogates this very notion of manufactured light and how it shapes the ways in which lives are lived, writing, "Today, technologies and systems built and designed for people living off the grid in the global south are inscribed with a set of ideas about the capacity of electricity to transform users into economically productive, rational moral subjects" (Cross 206). The "miracle" that Candace feels is an acknowledgement of the different temporal operations of how electricity constitutes her very subjecthood as she knows it. Candace's line of thought brings to attention the ways in which "electrified" subjects and ways of living under capitalism have been informed by 140 years of domesticated electricity.[27] Speaking to this history, Nandita Badami writes, "European cities imagined themselves to be at the very forefront of progress, in part because the sudden mass access to light was equated with an increase in rationality" (Badami 57). Badami traces the epistemics of lightness and darkness, suggesting the consideration of what she calls "endarkenment." She calls for endarkenment as it would mean to "Simply sit with darkness as an end in itself, without collapsing it into a critique of productivity, such as might be the case in casting nighttime darkness as a space of regeneration and restoration that feeds into and subsidizes capitalist productivity" (Badami 60). *Severance* attends to a possibility of endarkenment in the absence of the electrical infrastructures that drive capital.

The novel continues to indicate moments that signify how electricity and energy infrastructures are integrated in our subjecthood, and highlights the way the natural world is

[27] See Gretchen Bakke's "Electricity is Not a Noun," page 26.

harnessed, or as Gretchen Bakke puts it, “domesticated,” in creating and maintaining these infrastructures. While still making their way toward the Facility, Evan, one of the others in the group, started thinking aloud how he wished it was summer. Candace describes, “The thing he liked most about summer was the night sound of the cicadas, chirping in sync, like the hum of an electric power generator. It reminded him of growing up in Michigan, the nights he and his friends would climb the water tower to tag it or when they would hang out by the railroad tracks” (Ma 110). Evan’s childhood, much like the way Bob’s attachment to the time he spent in the mall (the Facility) as a child is described, is inextricable from energy cultures. Energy infrastructures drive capital but also shape subjecthood in strange and intimate ways; there is an affective undercurrent present in energy cultures which structures relations that are not obviously tied to electricity but are nonetheless imbued in every encounter we have. Evan’s memory of the auditory experience of cicadas as analogous to the sound of a power generator and spending his childhood at the water tower or railroad tracks near his house all point toward the ways that energy infrastructures are enfolded into quotidian life, almost naturalizing them.

Infrastructures of Racial Capitalism and Stock Labor

Prior to the outbreak, Candace worked at a publishing company called Spectra, which often outsourced labor to Shenzhen, China. Working in the “Bibles” department, Candace oversaw production and shipping of various design iterations of the Bible. One particular production job, the “Gemstone Bible,” was marketed toward preteen girls, “packaged with a keepsake semiprecious gemstone on a sterling alloy chain” (Ma 23). Candace receives notice from the Chinese gemstone supplier that Spectra contracted for the job that many of their workers had developed various lung diseases and pneumoconiosis from breathing in the

dust and granules from grinding and polishing semiprecious stones. Candace explains on the phone to her exasperated client that this gemstone supplier and many others have suspended production to evade lawsuits, to which her client stiffly replies,

> I don't want to sound like we don't care, because obviously we do, but this is disappointing news…We're not reconceiving this entire project on the basis of one supplier failing... so what you need to do, is to replace the supplier, find another gemstone source. It can't be that hard. Honestly, if you can't produce this then we're going to look elsewhere, maybe even in India (Ma 24-25).

Candace's client demands that she find another supplier that can fulfill the job, despite being aware of the deathly working conditions to produce these Bibles. In this (dis)regard, the supplier's labor is abstracted and detached from the very people who are laboring. Candace's conversation with her frustrated client demonstrates how the needs of capital are always contingent on (racialized) labor, and how this human labor power is displaced in favor of capital accumulation and the contrived variety it produces. Candace's positionality as an Asian American working her corporate office job also requires her to demand underpaid and sometimes dangerous production jobs from an overseas racial "other" that is also the racial same. This melancholic duality is articulated by Eng and Han, who explain how "assimilation into the national fabric demands a psychic splitting on the part of the Asian American subject who knows and does not know, at once, that she or he is part of the larger social body" (Eng & Han 42-43). Eng and Han speak to the historical repudiation of the indentured Asian laborer, such as how these laborers helped build and complete the transcontinental railroad, while simultaneously enduring exclusionary legislation to recognize Chinese immigrants as citizens. These laws not only barred them from institutional recognition, but also made them subject to institutional violence.

Ma draws attention to the historical structures of these labor relations by attending to contemporary abject labor sources specifically in China as an indispensable part of the energy infrastructures of capital. Capital accumulation requires a disposability built through the unequal differentiation of human value, and this racism enshrines the logics of that disposability.[28] In the context of the novel, such racialized labor forces are often spatialized in East, Southeast, and South Asian countries, and could be considered what Andreas Malm calls a "stock" energy in *Fossil Capital* (Malm 32). Malm distinguishes stock energy from flow energy, which he describes as being conditioned by landscape and weather (sources such as water or wind). Stock energy, such as coal (which is used to create steam), on the other hand, can be freely transported and stored, and is thus preferred by capital interests. I read these exploited racialized labor forces in Asia as energy sources that can be spatially and temporally controlled because of their geographic remove and the exclusionary boundary of the U.S. border.

In a flashback, Ma brings the reader back to when Candace was first hired at Spectra and went on a business trip to Shenzhen to oversee a print run, where Candace meets the operating directors of a large print supplier, Phoenix Sun and Moon Ltd. Candace grapples with her guilt of seeing the workers whose labor Spectra outsourced. She is resentful of the history of manufacturing jobs in suppliers in China:

> Which offered cheaper labor rates, even cheap enough to offset the shipping costs that coincided with the rise in oil prices. And after this, in another few years, the jobs will go elsewhere, to India or some other country willing to offer even cheaper rates, to produce iPods, Happy Meal Toys, skateboards, American flags, sneakers, air conditioners. The American businessman will come to visit these countries and tour their factories, inspect their manufacturing processes, sample their cuisines, while staying at their nicest hotels built to cater to them. I was a part of this (Ma 85).

28 See Melamed, Jodi. "Racial capitalism." Critical Ethnic Studies 1.1 (2015): 76-85.

Ryan Jobson writes of the relationship between labor and race relations, building on Cedric Robinson's work on racial capitalism. In so doing, he asserts that racial capital "attunes us to the always contingent relations of race, capital, and extraction that pervade ongoing regimes of accumulation by dispossession" (Jobson 228). Jobson explains how globalism made relations of labor and production to be figured as inevitable result of racial difference; he fixates this logic as historically contingent on chattel slavery. He writes, "[The enslavement of African peoples] should serve as a cogent reminder that the private ownership of energy necessitates extractive violence... A principal feature of capitalism is the imperative to reduce the creative capacities of human labor to the thermodynamic principles of human labor power" (Jobson 226). The seeds of fossil fueled capitalism were already present in chattel slavery, through which race became the sine qua non that delineated classes of labor in thermodynamic terms. As such, the energy produced by human labor is not only constituted by race, but also allows prior labor to be timelessly corroborated under the current state regime and its multinational capitalists. In *Severance*, Spectra's outsourcing of labor in Asia is similarly a manifestation of racialized labor as expendable material force that fuels global capitalism. Candace knows that clients and production firms capitalize on the cheapest labor, be that in China or India, regardless of working conditions (as seen with the Gemstone Bible). Though born in Fuzhou, Candace as an adult living and working in the U.S. directly bears witness to the processes of invisible, abstracted, and alienized labor overseas in service of products that are sold in the Global North, also signifying the psychic split that Eng and Han describe in the melancholic subject.

Overseas laborers in Asia allow for a spatial remove that contributes to their abstracted figuration. This labor that "does work" can be considered an energy source and is similarly abstracted in the ways that other energy sources are. As articulated earlier with Malm's

conceptualization of stock forms of energy, capitalists benefit from stock sources because they increased the spatial and temporal flexibility of production. This flexibility on the part of capital undermined the power of organized labor to control or disrupt production. Stock energy, then, is not only a means of exploiting labor but also disciplining laborers. The geographical remove of the labor sourced from various parts of Asia not only fuels Western capital, but also represents the labor force as alienated and Othered while being reliant on it. These divisions of labor are contingent on the exclusion located beyond the border of the United States; this spatial regulation allows labor as an energy source to be managed beyond the physical boundary of the nation (and the sea that spans the spatial distance between countries). This is why border control and immigration law play a significant part in maintaining this regime. As Lisa Lowe explains in *Immigrant Acts*, immigration "has been the locus of legal and political restriction of Asians as the 'other' in America;" such examples include The Chinese Exclusion Act, the internment of Japanese Americans, and the status of Filipino Americans as both immigrant and colonized nationals due to U.S. colonialism and capital investment in the Philippines (Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* 8). These differential and often contradictory formations of racialization demonstrate that immigration has been a key apparatus through which U.S. interests have recruited and regulated both labor and capital from Asian countries. Thus, in order for Asian labor to be and stay a stock energy source, it must be contained and regulated through racialization; border control technologies such as immigration and citizenship laws and policies are critical to this regime of the U.S. nation state and its global economy.

Severance makes this tension particularly apparent when Candace goes on her business trip to Shenzhen and converses with a factory worker. She cordially and professionally speaks with him about production jobs but imagines him saying aloud what he must think: "We

manufacture the emblematic text to propagate your country's Christian Euro-American ideologies, and for this, for this important task, you and your clients negotiate aggressively over pennies per unit cost, demand that we deliver early with every printing, and undercut the value of our labor year after year" (Ma 83-84). Candace's awareness of this dynamic and her positionality as a Chinese-American Westerner is indicative of the complete imbrication of global capitalism. As Malm describes the way that stock energy sources (steam) intentionally replaced flow energy sources (water), "…That steam arose as a form of power exercised by some people against others" (*The Origins of Fossil Capital* 36). *Severance* thus points the reader to the ways in which racialized labor has historically been and continues to be contingent on the demands of capital and the settler nation.

Temporal Infrastructures of Racial Capital

Eventually, Candace attempts to leave New York and is one of the last people to do so; at that point New York is almost completely abandoned, and the other few remaining that she comes across are struck by the fever. She gets picked up by a group of other survivors, led by Bob an overbearing man who directs the group in a quasi-religious, cult-like manner. He creates rituals of raiding houses for supplies while the group makes its way to the Facility, which is later exposed as a shopping mall as previously explained. The irony of ending up inside a mall in the face the rest of the Shen Fever pandemic indicates how even at the end of the world, attachment to capital is an inevitability; the ways in which global capitalism structures the American imaginary remains when nothing else does.

This residuality is also reflected in Candace's compulsion to work, and to keep working even when it no longer makes sense to, in the days of the initial outbreak. In this way, the novel

critiques the totalizing telos of capital and its reliance on racialized labor. Jobson writes of how racial capital collapses temporality, referring to what W.E.B. Du Bois describes as "dead labor," which "attunes us to the dominance of past, materialized, accumulated labor over immediate living labor" (Jobson 218). Labor becomes folded into time such that the past, present, and future are seamlessly integrated. Throughout the book in her flashbacks, Candace repeats some iteration of "I went to sleep. Then I got up. I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine" (Ma 159). In this way, Candace's habitual, disaffected behavior mimics that of the fevered, repeating tasks and repeating her days. Through this compulsion, Ma demonstrates that though labor is often abstracted, in these daily loops, labor is made overtly apparent, constructed, performed, showing how iterative time is under capitalism. Jobson particularly attends to "The present conjuncture of fossil capital, in which human labor power is further displaced by the bounty of prior accumulations of capital – namely, industrial technologies and extractive fuels – can only be understood alongside constitutively older histories of racial capital" (Jobson 227). The temporal smoothing that capitalism produces and reproduces is inextricable from the labor it is contingent on. As Ma demonstrates, even at the "end of the world," time is still marked by labor. When the group arrives at the Facility, Bob assigns each of them instructions and various projects to clean the Facility and make it more livable, sending a few out at a time for more supplies when needed. Candace notes, "In the end, we have come to the Facility to work. We work on the weekdays, rest on the weekends" (Ma 221). Bob's enforcement of the five-day work week perpetuates capitalist labor time and demonstrates this seamlessness of time and labor, and his attempt at regulating the group makes apparent the absurdity of capital's temporal logics and its constraints.

Reproductive Futurism reflected in Energy Infrastructures of Racial Capital

Although the totalizing telos of capitalist relations is apparent in the novel, it does carve a space for the potential beyond capital, something that might emerge from the ruins of capital. These implications manifest through how Ma navigates the portrayal of Candace's pregnancy throughout the novel. The reader learns early on that Candace is pregnant, the father having left New York before the Shen Fever broke in the city. It is unclear if Candace's unborn child would be a carrier of Shen Fever or if it would be similarly immune. Candace attempts to hide her pregnancy from the rest of the group in fear of her child becoming subsumed in a narrative of deliverance, much like what has happened to other pregnant mothers in dystopian narratives.[29] Bob eventually finds out, and upon arriving at The Facility, Bob locks her in a L'Occitane in the mall. "It's miraculous. The fact that you're pregnant, it means something for our groups. Maybe you don't know it but it does. It makes us feel hopeful. I know everyone will be happy to hear about it" (Ma 167). The Child is a temporal representation of a future, a tabula rasa that allows for the hope of salvation, or at least, redemption.[30] Candace is still pregnant and escapes her imprisonment at The Facility after a dream in which her dead mother visits her and urges her to leave. The novel also ends with the reader not knowing if her child was even born, which forecloses the narrative of the novel from becoming a salvation narrative itself. This can be read as a refusal of capitalism's linear logic and colonial telos, diverging from the usual reparative narrative that ends with the "redemption" of "humankind" in the birth of the Child.

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[29] This trope is used in many dystopian fictions, such as Alfonso Cuaron's *Children of Men* (2006), Margaret Atwood's novel and its TV adaption, *The Handmaid's Tale,* and George Romero's film and its remake, *Dawn of the Dead* (2004).

[30] This conceptualization is derived from Lee Edeman's *No Future,* which I return in the next paragraph

The sanctity of the child is the reproduction of the present, a projection of the same into the future. Lee Edelman writes of this fixation of the Child and reproductive futurism in his polemic No Future, asserting that the Child is "The perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" and "The emblem of futurity's unquestioned value" (Edelman 2-3). These provocations make it difficult, if not impossible to be "against" the Child; being against the Child is being abject, and figures one as an illegible subject. However, this is precisely what Edelman calls for in the context of queers becoming enfolded into legal legibility and heteronormative hegemony. He writes, "Queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to [the place of abjection], accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure" (Edelman 3). The refusal of the Child as such is a refusal of the reproduction of the current social order; Edelman suggests that the sentiment that children are "the future" is perpetuated by those who would benefit from reiteration of the present. This insistence of something else, of something other than, manifests in Candace's decision to leave The Facility and the institution of capitalism and the restrained, lasting futurity it represents, even though she and her child may be "safer" there with the others and their resources.

This insistence and faith in the futurity in the figure of the Child is also analogous to the ways in which renewable energy sources are hailed as the redemptive solution to fossil fuels and the ironically irreparable damage they have done to Earth. Darin Barney and Imre Szeman speak to this affective attachment to renewable energy, specifically that of solar. They write, "Solar energy is a promise. It has come to be seen as a solution to the present – perhaps the ultimate one, the only one. It names a future that we are already (all too slowly) creeping into, one which

seems to have none of the problems that trouble or worry the present" (Szeman & Barney 1). In this way, solar energy positions those resistant to it the same way those who are resistant to the Child: unintelligible and backwards. Solar is a representation of a resolution, but with an undercurrent of ambiguity that makes it all the more appealing. As Szeman & Barney iterates, this appeal is powerful because it "cuts across social and class divisions, the public and the private, and traverses political and national borders alike" (Szeman & Barney 2). Renewable energy promises just that – renewal – but what exactly is renewed can be unclear. Many in energy humanities have considered the gaps of what solar energy might produce, a line of thought called "solarity" that creates a space to address these gaps, such as the social and political conditions that solar energy would bring and the ways in which geopolitical and economic relationships would change with this energy transition. Although "Solar might avert the end of the world… a solar future might well come into being in ways that strengthen the present's grip on the end of history" (Szeman & Barney 4). Interpreted this way, solar energy can be attached to a particular configuration of futurity that is merely in the grip of the present, as it were. Like the figure of the Child, the promise of solar "redeems," but can actually be used as a means of reproduction of regulation and capital.

Although not explicitly referring to solarity, *Severance* offers an opening in its critique of capital and energy consumption that can be akin to particular interventions that solarity attempts to make. Candace escapes by takes a Nissan, stealing the key from Bob, who eventually became Fevered. She drives the car to escape the Facility and toward Chicago for as long as the car can go with what remains in the tank: "The Nissan emits a groan. The fuel light blinks furiously… the car manages another few blocks, until it stops with a lurch. I hit the gas hard, but it only makes a terrible sound in protest, then nothing. The engine stops. It's dead" (Ma 290-291). She

gets out of the car and starts walking, and the novel ends. Ma attends to the details of the Nissan's fuel depleting while Candace presses on toward something unknown, but something beyond the Facility. The lack of narrative closure gestures toward the potentiality of something better than the present, as Candace seeks what she does not know yet, abandoning the Facility and its perpetuation of capitalist time. The reader does not know if Candace will survive, nor if the child is ever born, nor is it indicated that "society" recovers from the pandemic and rebuilds from the ruin of not only the Shen Fever global outbreak, but also ruin of the Earth itself from the extracted energy sources that fueled the capital-driven world.

Conclusion: Sabotaging Capital

Candace's escape from the Facility could be read further as a "fugitive" act of refusal. This kind of fugitivity is aligned with what Andreas Malm might call sabotage. In *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, Malm delineates what "intelligent sabotage" could look like, calling for tactics to target fossil fuel infrastructures, asserting that it is not too late to intervene and minimize climate suffering, even if it cannot be halted. He writes, "Sabotage can be done softly, even gingerly," encouraging the idea of undermining the fossil fuel economy in ways that are not necessarily dramatic despite the title of his book *(How to Blow Up a Pipeline* 79). Though not specifically in reference to the fossil economy, Candace's small divergences throughout the novel, and her decision to escape at the end of it, demonstrate acts of sabotage that quietly acknowledge the inadequacies of the (il)logics of capital and its infrastructures.

One such moment is Candace's first "live" stalk with the group, where they raided a house with a Fevered family still alive in it, not yet dead but close to it. Candace describes how Bob would talk about stalks: "Stalking, Bob liked to say, is an aesthetic experience… it isn't just

breaking and entering. It isn't just looting. It is envisioning the future. It is building the Facility and all of the things that we want to have with us" (Ma 58). For live stalks, Bob would gather all the Fevered at the end and kill them, explaining to the others that he was "releasing" them from their cycle of routines. The house they stalked contained a family of four, though they had initially thought it was three. Candace came across the young Fevered daughter that the others had missed. Candace tries to hide her from Bob, who became angry with Candace and makes her be the one to kill her after he shoots the others dead. Though Candace gets punished this way for trying to hide the girl, her initial instinct to protect her is a quiet act of sabotage that undermines Bob's ritual of killing the Fevered. Sabotage is a reconfiguration of social and political possibility, and Candace's small but not insignificant refusal of Bob's rules and rituals for the sake of a "future" at the Facility speak to what sabotage allows: a gesture of refusal.

Ma creates an uncanny temporal reversal of the past and future that takes shape in the way that the natural world encroaches back upon infrastructures that fuel capital. While running on the freeway, Candace describes, "…Pines and bare branches brushed against us noncommittally. Everywhere we ran, we were touched, we couldn't not be touched even if we preferred it that way. The world just felt unbelievably full and dense, bursting" (Ma 130). The strange sensation of feeling the branches of the trees growing into the freeway creates an impression that the natural world has been unleashed in some way, no longer harnessed, kept at bay, or domesticated. The absence of energies in the infrastructures they fuel, such as cars fueled by oil on freeways built by asphalt concrete, produce visions of a past that has pushed into a "lost" future.

This temporal incongruity is also apparent right before Candace leaves New York; she notices the stark emptiness of Times Square, but "It wasn't just the emptiness. In the absence of

maintenance crews, vegetation was already taking over; the most prodigious were the fernlike ghetto palms, so-called because they exploded in prolific waves across urban areas, seemingly growing from concrete, on rooftops, parking lots, any and all sidewalk cracks" (Ma 252). The abundance of the vegetation that grows incessantly is indicative of not only a time before but also a time after capital and its infrastructures. This intertwining duality of the past and future calls into question the linearity of capitalist time and its iterative nature. As she looks out the window, Candace "Imagined the future as a time-lapse video, spanning the years it takes for Times Square to be overrun by ghetto palms, wetland vegetation, and wildlife. Or maybe I was actually conjuring up the past, the pine- and -hickory forested island that the Dutch first glimpsed upon arriving" (Ma 252-253). This simultaneous compression and expansion of time, past and future, are collapsed and indistinguishable from one another, eliding the certitude of telos and sense of sequence.

Candace's decision to escape The Facility with her unborn baby, as well as the plants and wildlife that spring forth both signify that capitalist time does not have to be an inevitability, embodying a kind of "stealing back" that sabotage or fugitivity evokes.[31] If the embodied experience of feeling capitalist time is iterative and apathetic, Ma suggests that time at the end of the world (the end of capital) is lush and visceral. This image of time is informed by backward feeling, resisting the utopian commitment to the notion of progress in perpetuity and instead turns to the past. Candace finds a way to escape her imprisonment and through the urging of her dead mother, who visits her in a dream. Candace's mother as a figure of the past tells her daughter to escape to safety, preventing her unborn grandchild from becoming subsumed in a narrative of redemption and salvation, thus refusing the false liberation of reproductive futurism.

[31] See Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *the undercommons: fugitive planning & black study*

Moments like this, and the novel's entire narrative melancholic affectation, signify Heather Love's articulation of "approach[ing] the past as something living – as something dissonant, beyond our control, and capable of touching us in the present" and a refusal to accept a future that leaves behind the past (Love 9-10).

Chapter Three: Gendered Orientalism, Melancholia, and Regimes of Neoliberal Multiculturalism

On March 16th, 2021, Robert Long killed Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Paul Michels, Soon Chung Park, Xiaojie Tan, Delaina Yaun, and Yong Ae Yue in the greater Atlanta area of Georgia, an event often referred to as the "Atlanta spa shootings." Six of these victims were Asian women. This chapter seeks to situate these killings within the long and ongoing history of gendered orientalism and Asian American disposability in the United States. By discussing Orientalism and historical configurations of the racial "Other," I trace how liberalism weaponizes these racial logics through rhetoric of diversity and how mechanisms of neoliberal multiculturalism emerge from liberal humanism. Contextualizing the Atlanta spa shootings within these historical power relations demonstrates that this incident was not a singular, random act of violence that it is often framed to be, given the rise of what U.S. liberalism would call a "post-racial" era and the racialized narrative of Asian Americans being the "model minority." This chapter will interrogate the ways in which U.S. imperialism manages the racialized subjects of Asian Americans through regimes of neoliberal multiculturalism in the present day. I do so by problematizing the discursive public responses (including hashtags such #StopAsianHate and #HateIsAVirus) to the shooting that demonstrate and the processes of neoliberalism's economic and social racialization.

This chapter examines the consequent investigations and legal proceedings for Robert Long's sentencing, as well as the response of the Biden administration to the incident via the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act. I demonstrate how such legislation elides how the origins and perpetuation of Asian "hate" have been fomented by U.S. imperial forces (including state police,

border control, and military presence abroad), while affirming the state's carceral reach. This analysis consequently also illustrates how a carceral response not only brings more harm than it does solutions, but also deepens divides amongst racial minorities, ultimately reifying the state's power to regulate its subjects.

Orientalism & Modern Liberal Humanism

The Atlanta Massacre must be contextualized within historically racialized narratives of racial imperialism, and more specifically, the sexualization and fetishization of Asian women's bodies that rose out of the figure of the "Orient" in Western cultural imaginaries. Orientalism, Edward Said writes, "can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). Said traces Orientalism in the 18th and 19th centuries as a political vision of the West (Europeans, and later Americans) that sought to construct and suppress Eastern populations. The construct of the "Orient" as such is an embodiment of *other*, of exoticism, and of difference that also later elicited the fear of the "yellow peril" in the early twentieth century. As Michael Odijie explains, "the precise meaning of the phrase 'yellow peril' is difficult to capture. The term broadly describes an existential threat to the white race and white people not with a specific source or from any one country or one people, but from nameless hordes of barbarous yellow people invading the European continent" (Odijie 360). Odijie further discusses the layered dimensions of this peril, anxieties that industrial growth in East Asia would displace European economic strength and population, but also that a perceived political and military threat that would overtake Western global power. As such, Orientalism (and the "yellow peril" that emerged from it) and colonial rule co-constitute

each other and has informed continual covert and overt forms of violence in our present moment and contextualize how people like Robert Long could justify targeted dehumanization and murder of Asian women. What follows is an attempt to articulate these murders as not the consequence of not only one "sick" man, but instead as a culmination of a particular interminable history of racialized and gendered violences against women of Asian descent.

To be more specific, because Said's conceptualization is steeped in European imperialism, I turn to Lisa Lowe to address American genealogies of Orientalism. In *Immigrant Acts,* Lowe writes,

> Historically and materially, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Asian Indian, and Filipino immigrants have played absolutely crucial roles in the building and the sustaining of America; and at certain times, these immigrants have been fundamental to the construction of the nation as a simulacrum of inclusiveness. Yet the project of imagining the nation as homogeneous requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come as fundamentally "foreign" origins antipathetic to the modem American society that "discovers," "welcomes," and "domesticates" them. (Lowe 5)

As Lowe explains, the United States has and continues to attach formations of its own nationhood to the otherness that "Asia" is figured with. For example, the American imaginary makes flexible in particular the racialization of Asian Americans, who are seen as a perpetual foreigner, even after the repeal of legislation excluding Asians from citizenship. Lowe draws attention to the putatively "free" labor of the Chinese indentured laborer to demonstrate the promise of liberal humanist inclusion into the American fold. This promise was contingent on the acquiescence of Chinese laborers to the heteronormative ideals of the bourgeois family in American civil society, in which women are expected to serve in the domestic space. Lowe's historicization of this partial inclusion is key to understand how the figure of the Chinese woman is imagined and constructed by colonial authority.

The rise of liberalism smoothly abetted the obfuscation and erasure of these marred histories, while simultaneously advancing ideals of freedom and social progress. In *Intimacies of Four Continents,* Lisa Lowe argues that race is an enduring remainder of the processes of colonial difference, indicative of how liberalism universalizes the human while at the same time assimilates or forgets those who create the very conditions of the "freedoms" that liberalism affords. Lowe traces the genealogy of the project of modern liberalism, which emerged out of European political philosophy, as dependent on abstract promises "of human freedom, rational progress, and social equality apart from the global conditions on which they depended" (Lowe 2). In turn, she contends that modern liberal humanism is characterized by an economy of affirmation and forgetting; this process naturalizes the violence of colonial conquest while simultaneously forgetting the global divisions of racial difference upon which promises of freedom are dependent. Such differentiation of race includes settlers representing indigenous peoples as "savage" and inhuman to rationalize settlement and transatlantic slavery, as well as conceiving of the Chinese as inscrutable and diametrically opposed to Western development and modernization (following Orientalist logics). The partial inclusion of Asian people in liberal humanism hinged on the exclusion of Black people whose humanity was wholly denied since chattel slavery.[32] The conceptual framework of modern liberal humanism that Lowe provides is crucial because these colonial divisions of humanity are "imbricated processes... ongoing and continuous in our contemporary moment" (Lowe 7) that help explain the conditions from which neoliberalism and its discursive terrain of multiculturalism emerged.

[32] Christina Sharpe describes how Black lives are steeped in insistent violence and negation: "…Black being appears in the space of the asterisked human as the insurance for, as that which underwrites, *white circulation as the human*" (110, emphasis mine).

Bodily Inscription of Asian Women

Orientalism has made the gendered racialization of Asian women particularly normalized in mainstream American cinema, through figures such as the "Lotus Blossom" or the "Dragon Lady," or the hyper-sexualized temptress. As Maria Hwang and Rhacel Parreñas explain, these archetypes are pervasive and assume a "moral duplicity that render them ill-fitted for American society" (571). The Lotus Blossom is a figure of submissive Asian femininity, servile and devoted, while the Dragon Lady is the deceitful opposite in her treacherous behavior through her captivating sexuality.[33] U.S. intervention and military presence in East and Southeast Asia have also significantly produced the archetype of the Asian prostitute. The hyper-sexual image that emerges from this representation, often referred to as the "LBFM" (Little Brown Fucking Machine), a derogatory slang term used by American soldiers, embodies a "femininity [that] is characterized by a machine-like sexual drive and performance of eroticized poverty;" one of the most prominent cultural references to this figure is from the film *Full Metal Jacket,* in which a Vietnamese prostitute seduces two American soldiers with the notorious line, "Well, baby, me so horny, me so horny. Me love you long time" (Hwang & Parreñas 571).[34] All of these archetypes perpetuate the hypersexualized, gendered racialization of Asian women's bodies.

This fetishization operates within a matrix of domination[35] where racialized status interlocks with a gendered subjectivity to position such women as naturalized targets of violence. The moral economy is thus specifically racialized and "reproduce[s] common-sense notions of

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[33] In *The Gendered Racialization of Asian Women as Villainous Temptresses,* Hwang and Parreñas describe examples in film that demonstrate the Lotus Flower, Dragon Lady, and the LBFM are tropes such as in *Toll of the Sea* (Chester Franklin 1992), *The Thief of Bagdad* (Michael Powell 1924), and *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick 1987)

[34]Hwang & Parreñas

[35] See Collins, Patricia Hill. (1990) 2000. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge

itinerant and irresponsible behavior, which is then seen as naturally inviting victimization… being located in zones of degeneracy makes these women all the more vulnerable to violence – a violence that is naturalized and divested of its structural underpinnings" (Jiwani & Young 902). Put differently, these historically entrenched tropes of Asian women and their sexualization delimit their social location as outside of boundaries of respectability and morality, in both life and death.

These figurations also extend to the specific gendered assumptions of Asian female bodies as a source of transnational labor, in terms of menial manufacturing, military prostitution, and the subsequent sex tourism industry that emerged from military prostitution. The naturalization of the Asian woman's body as hyper-sexualized utilizes the same logics as the fixation of physical characteristics as indicative of a particular innate ability to work on specific tasks. Laura Hyun Yi Kang tracks this staging of Asian female bodies in her book, *Compositional Subjects*, describing a particular Malaysian brochure advertising their production company to attract American investment:

> The manual dexterity of the Oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small, and she works fast with extreme care…Who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance, to contribute to the efficiency of a bench assembly production line than the Oriental girl?

Other brochures like this also demonstrate the ways in which Asian countries proliferated this image of racialized femininity to attract Western multinational corporations. These workers, as Laura Hyun Yi Kang writes, "are repeatedly referred to as 'cheap, docile labor,' as if depressed wages and workplace discipline were ontological properties unique to these women" (190). Not only does this inscription justify itself in its naturalizing figurations, but the homogenization of

"Asian women" as good and docile workers reinforces the fixity of geographic otherness and racial commonality under the continental umbrella of "Asia." As explained also in the preceding chapter on *Severance*, there is an essentializing nature in all of these inscriptions. In this specific context, I call attention to the gendered dimension of the shifting nature of the different ways in which Asian female bodies can be figured to fit the needs of transnational capital. The image of the seductive Asian female prostitute as well the subordination of Asian women and their "docility" and subservience are both formations of subordination that are used to legitimize labor exploitation.

Neoliberal Multiculturalism

The racial formations of liberalism shape the idea of "freedom" as an essential part of inclusive nationalism that establishes the moral legitimacy of the U.S. empire, while also obscuring the fact that global capitalism organizes race in such a way that naturalizes a system of exploited labor in the global South and capital accumulation by the global North. Jodi Melamed traces these logics of racial liberalism, explaining that "racial liberalism's cultural model of race [sic] renewed race as a procedure for naturalizing privilege and inequality" despite its simultaneous promotion of the idea of "a racially inclusive U.S. national culture as the key to achieving America's manifest destiny and proof of American exceptionalism and universality" (Melamed 7). These contradictions were managed by multicultural discourse by the state, which subsumes racialized bodies into a vision of the US as an idealized nation of equal opportunity. The particular emergence of neoliberalism is characterized by the mobilization of this discourse to buttress economic regulatory policies. The rise of neoliberalism is characterized by the emphasis of "the responsibility of the individual in tandem with the dismantling of social welfare

and community services funded by the state" (Harvey 14 –15). Put differently, the fundamental mission of the neoliberal state is to optimize conditions to support capitalist aims; these conditions are imbued in normative standards through which behaviors are measured, assessed, and corrected vis-à-vis capital utility and value.

Melamed's articulation of neoliberal multiculturalism is an essential framework that helps discern how the particular racial logics of neoliberalism depart from that of liberalism. She describes, "like racial liberalism, contemporary neoliberal multiculturism sutures official antiracism to state policy in a manner that prevents the calling into question of global capitalism. However, it *deracializes* official antiracism to an unprecedented degree, turning racial reference into a series of rhetorical gestures of ethical right and certainty" (Melamed 16, emphasis mine). Neoliberalism rationalizes the organization of the economic and social processes of capitalism through the erasure of race in its rhetoric that blurs civil rights and economic rights. Neoliberal policy deploys multiculturalism by displacing racial reference with "culture," which is "detached from the history of racial conflict and antiracist struggle" but nonetheless "remains associated with ideas of 'diversity,' 'representation,' and fairness' (Melamed 19). As such, neoliberal multiculturalism weaponizes frameworks such as intersectionality to perpetuate racial capitalism while legitimizing U.S. global power as anti- or post-racist.

Co-opting Intersectionality

While Kimberlé Crenshaw's original coining of intersectionality was initially formulated to recognize the illegibility of the black female subject and her social position in judicial structures of power, "intersectionality" has been co-opted as a tool for the neoliberal regime. In Brittany Cooper's work covering the genealogies of intersectionality, Cooper evokes Crenshaw's

argument to explain how intersectionality "constituted a specific paradigm or framework for understanding black women's subordinated social position and the situated effects of mutually constructing systems of power and oppressions within black women's lives" (Cooper 7). Here, emphasis on intersectionality in relation to subordination accounts for institutional visibility and consequent structures of legibility. Intersectionality (insofar as it is used as an analytic tool) is not an account of a person's identity, but rather an account of power. However, as Cooper remarks, "there is now a troubling move to diminish the import of the racial foundations of intersectionality by coopting its genealogy and declaring the concept to be the 'brainchild of feminism' rather than the 'brainchild of black feminism'" (Cooper 22).

This shift treats intersectionality as a feminist account of *identity* and is leveraged in the project of identity politics, implicated at the personal level rather than a structural one. Similarly, it treats race as an essentialist account of identity at a personal register that omits the complex and reiterative processes of institutional social categorization. This cooptation erases the Black feminist origin of intersectionality and its critique of colonial divisions of humanity that differentially positions racial minorities. The "post-racial discourses use the neoliberal language of diversity to prove that we are either beyond racism or that racism happens in individualist and isolated incidences. Broad systemic racism is no longer a problem" (Cooper 18). Multicultural neoliberalism deploys this treatment of intersectionality in ways that in fact deracialize and de-politicize racial reference. The discursive framework of diversity that emerges from this, as Cooper notes, dangerously suggests that racism is an individual problem, absolving the entrenched structural nature of race relations; this shift to the individual is precisely how the case of Robert Long killing six Asian women was treated.

The day after the shooting, Robert Long was charged with eight counts of murder and one count of aggravated assault. Cherokee County officials of the greater Atlanta area stated that Long was "pretty much fed up and kind of at the end of his rope. Yesterday was a really bad day for him and this is what he did."[36] The complete dismissiveness of Long specifically targeting the Asian women at these spas in favor of a matter of individual "mental health" demonstrates how neoliberal discourse deracializes this "really bad day" by detaching Long's shooting spree from the histories of state-sanctioned gendered racism. There is irony that lies in this detachment because neoliberal multiculturalism figures Asian Americans as the ultimate ideological figure of a "multicultural American." This figure manifests as the "model minority," a racial narrative that describes Asian immigrants and Asian Americans as productive, high-achieving, law-abiding citizens. This myth has often been mobilized as a "weapon in the war against Black America" to foment a racial divide and deflect the perpetuation of white supremacy (Prashad 6). The model minority myth reinforces multicultural neoliberalism's values, such as individualism and entrepreneurialism, discounting any structural constraints on particular racialized bodies.

#StopAsianHate and its Implications

Although #StopAsianHate and #StopAAPIHate was highly circulated after the Atlanta spa shootings, the hashtag had emerged on social media before the event, in the face of the rise in Sinophobia and verbal and physical assaults directed at visibly Asian people during the COVID-19 pandemic. In January 2021, for example, an 84-year-old Thai man, Vicha Ratanapakdee, was attacked in San Francisco.[37] Ratanapakdee later died from those

[36] From the sheriff's office spokesman Capt. Jay Baker. See article, 'Enough Is Enough': Atlanta-Area Spa Shootings Spur Debate Over Hate Crime Label : NPR for more details on Cherokee County's official response.
[37] Teenager suspected in killing of 84-year-old S.F. man pleads not guilty (sfchronicle.com)

injuries. There have been many other similar reported and unreported incidents like this throughout the country since the onset of the pandemic. While this hashtag and slogan has a genuine intent of raising awareness about recent racial violence, it in fact obfuscates deadly systems of racial oppression, using the murky term "hate" which disavows histories of state sponsored racial violence and racist sentiment that conspires to produce anti-Asian violence. While in hate crimes as labeled in legislation can lead to different legal procedures and harsher sentencing, framing such acts of brutality as "hate" or a "hate crime" orients a focus toward perpetrators themselves, rather than the structure that produced them. This is what the concept intersectional feminism originally sought to address: matrices of oppression within systems of power, rather than matters of personal or individual identity. In the case of the Atlanta spa shootings, the "hate crime" frame of reference forces the question of Robert Long's attack being "racially motivated," and redirects attention away from the racial inequality that has long been imbued throughout systems of power and legibility and simply toward a single person whose intentions to kill are questioned as, perhaps, racist.

While the naming of "hate" is nebulous, this sense of ambiguity also means hate crimes are a difficult legal category and left up to the judgement of individual prosecutors and legal investigators. For example, Cherokee District Attorney Shannon Wallace stated that her office's investigation found no evidence of any bias based on race or gender, stating "We were not able to conclude that it was motivated by bias or race. In discussing this case, this was not any kind of hate crime."[38] Though this insistence that Robert Long was not motivated by gender or race is ironic in the face of #StopAsianHate, it also demonstrates that hate crime law is often misplaced, though such legislation attempts to signal particular social values. In May 2020, Georgia passed

[38] Atlanta spa shootings: Georgia man pleads guilty - BBC News

a hate-crimes law after Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man, was shot in Brunswick a few months earlier in February. Many have speculated that this hate-crimes law could apply in the court proceedings for Robert Long. Chuck Efstration, a Georgia state representative who sponsored the hate crimes law has said, "The great thing about the bill that we passed last year – it provides both sex and gender as protected classes in addition to race and other protected groups."[39] As such, even when hate crime bills are passed, they are often not implemented to "protect" marginalized groups as legislatures may argue they do, but instead are used to increase policing and legitimize the carceral state.

The circulation of #StopAsianHate and #HateIsAVirus is most prominent on the Instagram platform, where users create and share "infographics." This kind of "hashtag activism" was also popular particularly during the Black Lives Matter movement during the protests concerning George Floyd in the summer of 2020. The mobilization of "hate" in these hashtags is optimal for the medium of a platform like Instagram, where infographics are neatly designed to educate audiences on complex topics vis a vis a 10-slide carousel. I argue that this format and the mobilization of "stopping" "hate" mutually fortify each other; discursively, hate reduces intertwining legacies of state-sponsored oppression to poor personal choices and attitudes, while the Instagram infographic format mediates these complexities into palatable, aesthetically-pleasing squares that can be alarmingly simplistic (particularly with the misplaced intentions of #HateIsAVirus). Along with statistics, calls to action (if there are any), such as hate crime legislation or "amplifying Asian voices" can be vague and lack context, even while conveying political urgency. Figure 1 is a screenshot of one

[39] Georgia added a hate-crimes law last year after the death of Ahmaud Arbery. - The New York Times (nytimes.com)

such popular carousel infographic that many shared particularly after celebrity "influencer" Chrissy Teigan shared it to her followers.[40] The first slide of the carousel reads, "*Being anti racist includes acknowledging the Asian American experience*." Other slides follow, including one with hate crime statistics targeting Asian Americans, and another with the text "Asian Americans are moms/dads/neighbors/classmates/essential workers/teacher/people." (See figure 2). While well-meaning, this language mirrors some commonly used phrases in discussing sexism and women's rights in the past, in the popular expression, "She's someone's sister/mother/daughter/wife." Much like this phrase positions a woman in terms of her relationality to others, particularly men, Figure 2 adopts this framing, arguing for the humanity of Asian Americans through their positionalities as contributing members of society. Productivity is attached to personhood, delineating Asian Americans' "value" in their roles in the lives for others.

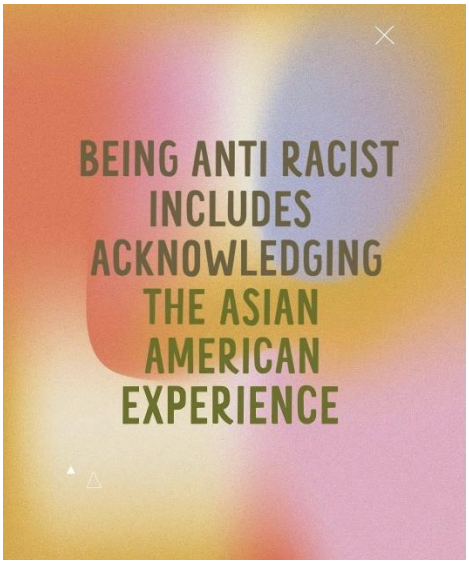

Fig. 1

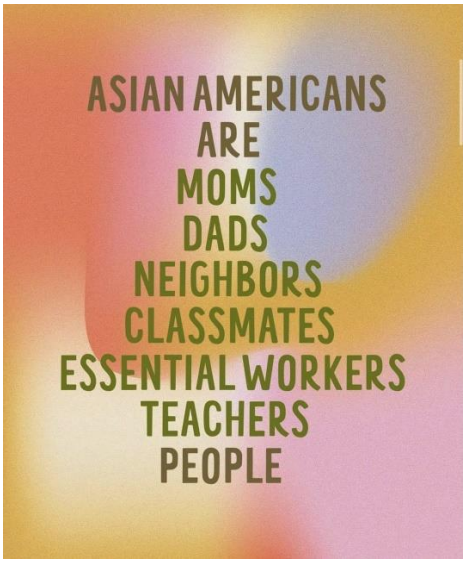

Fig. 2

[40] https://www.instagram.com/p/CLPg_YWBzVt/?utm_medium=copy_link

Other similar infographics that follow the carousel format for #StopAsianHate have encouraged users to "Follow Asian creators," and "Celebrate Asian joy." These suggestions not only reify the notion of Asians as a monolith (also discounting the distinct political category of Asian Americans), but they can also minimize the role that the U.S. imperial state has in producing and the very cultural consciousness of Orientalism and Yellow Peril that incite individual racist ideologies. We can support Asian Americans by eating or shopping at local, Asian-owned businesses (as we should), but this continues to follow neoliberal logics of individual responsibility through an attention economy if it is the only call to action that the public takes. This kind of rehearsal of social justice content on Instagram in particular demonstrates an economy of visibility, which Sarah Banet-Weiser describes as "a media landscape that is many things at once: a technological and economic context devoted to the accumulation of views, clicks, 'likes,' etcetera" (Banet-Weiser 2). Though Banet-Weiser explains how an economy of visibility structures popular feminism in particular, this economy is imbued throughout visually-driven platforms such as Instagram, gesturing "to a set of networked cultures rather than to a specific political mechanism" (6). She demonstrates that this circulation of such media in this economy of visibility is enfolded in the larger attention economy, where the number of views or interactions privilege neatly packaged information that can unintentionally obscure larger contexts of racialized and gendered formations. The attention economy rewards and privileges content that "optimizes" difficult topics; the formal quality of the visual infographic makes it much easier to vaguely encourage a user to "acknowledge" the Asian American experience than to explain the ongoing entrenched relationship that the United States has with Asian countries, particularly in the context of U.S. military intervention and occupation in many of these countries, including South Korea and Vietnam. This kind of diluted language

also effortlessly allows corporations and brands to co-opt it; this is particularly ironic when so many brands use overseas labor in East and Southeast Asia to manufacture goods and other products sold predominantly to the market in the Global North.

There is a complex dimension to the pervasive nature of these infographics and how they are shared and circulated by Asian Americans themselves in reaction to learning about the Atlanta victims and other targeted violences. To return to Eng and Han's work on racial melancholia from the previous chapters, these instances make evident that "Indeed, we live in strange times: on the one hand, we inhabit a putatively colorblind and post-racial society suffused with proliferating discourses of multiculturalism and diversity; on the other hand, we witness on a daily basis ongoing and escalating racial discord and violence" (Eng & Han 24). The colorblindness that has increasingly steeped the public American imaginary is undercut by the erasure of loss and the forgetting of histories of violence incited by the state itself. The unresolved grief that these "strange times" elicit manifest melancholically. Such quotidian negotiations demonstrate the interminable nature of melancholia, and social media infographics are a small part of this psychic landscape, a (however misplaced) effort to articulate a sense of injustice.

Much like many of the other mass shootings that have occurred in the United States, the articles that came in the aftermath of the shootings predominantly covered the shooter, with coverage on his victims and their lives minimal and cursory. The *Washington Post*, for example, released an article titled, "The Atlanta spa shooting suspect's life before attacks." It opened with, "The war within Robert Aaron Long as evident for years," before going on to extensively describe Long's youth and relationship with his parents and his church. Such writing contributes

to the ways in which #StopAsianHate produces and further reifies the idea that the "problem" is located in extreme emotional responses of individuals such as Long. The article describes, "Long as plagued by the conflict between his belief that his obsession with sex was immoral and his dedication to furthering his faith." It omits the connection between this belief in sex as immoral and the racialization of the Asian women workers at the spas Long frequented, who claimed that he was shamefully addicted to sex.[41]

This refusal to acknowledge that gendered violence and racialized violence are not mutually exclusive contributes to the contested nature of Long's killings being "racially motivated" and the categorization of them as a hate crime. The liberalism imbued in this framing of hate asserts that the actions of those who engage in intimidation, threat, or violence are simply outliers acting outside social norms. This kind of language preemptively offers a "solution" to the "problem" of "hate" - that being hate crime legislation. Hate crime legislation, while seemingly a means to curb racial violence, only extends the reach of the carceral state. Who truly benefits from the category "hate crime?" Simply naming such incidents does not protect racialized victims in vulnerable positions, particularly in this case of Asian women and sex workers. #StopAsianHate obfuscates and erases the legacies of U.S. imperial intervention in Asian countries, anti-Asian immigration laws, and exploitation of overseas Asian labor. However, it also further enables the mobilization of the carceral apparatus of the United State and distorts the racist and gendered hierarchies that present lives are built on. Consequently, while hate crime legislation such as the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act may seemingly be a gesture of recompense or legal protection, I argue that it reinforces liberal

[41] Man pleads guilty to 4 Asian spa killings, sentenced to life | AP News

reliance on policing a legal system that disproportionately targets Black and other vulnerable racialized peoples instead of protecting them.

COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act & President Joe Biden's Speech

On May 20, 2021, President Joe Biden signed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act[42] in response to the rise in anti-Asian sentiment and violence throughout the pandemic, including the Atlanta spa shootings that happened just a few months earlier. In his speech, President Biden thanks Congress and other that supported the bill, remarking, "We simply haven't seen this kind of bipartisanship for much too long in Washington. You're showing [that] our democracy can work and deliver for the American people." This articulation of faith in the "American people" and the democratic process simultaneously reifies a false nationalism that touts equality and eclipses the racial formations that constitute what the public consciousness thinks of as an "American." Biden goes on: "For centuries, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders – diverse and vibrant communities – have helped build this nation." Biden participates in what Lowe calls "an economy of affirmation and forgetting," characteristic of liberal humanist understanding. Lowe argues that narratives of freedom help constitute this formalism of affirmation and forgetting. In his assertion that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders "helped build this nation," Biden omits the ways in which their labor was and continues to be exploited, further denying their legibility as citizens.

Lowe demonstrates this history through the figure of the coolie as a construction that was strategically positioned as an ambiguously liminal laborer. She explains how the Chinese and Indian contract laborer was "brought to the Americas to supplement, replace, and obscure

[42] Remarks by President Biden at Signing of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act | The White House

the labor previously performed by slaves, yet to be differentially distinguished from them" (Lowe 27). These laborers that were recruited to work to create the very infrastructure of the United States (such as mining, agriculture, and railroad construction) were ineligible for citizenship precisely because they were considered "unfree." Biden's speech deftly navigates past the Page Law of 1875, which prohibited Chinese female immigration, as well as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which halted further Chinese immigration. His emphasis on nation-building, both literally and sentimentally, operates on an affective register that promotes the liberal promises of freedom and self-determination. He emphasizes,

> We're the United States of America. We're a good and decent people. We're unique among all nations in that we are uniquely a product of a document - not an ethnicity, not a religion, not a geography, of a document. And think about this – I'm being literal – uniquely a product of a document that says 'We hold these truths to be self-evident... that all men and women are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'[43]

Biden's reference to the Constitution to assert American exceptionalism and the nation's values of "goodness" and equality is undercut by the contradiction that many are excluded from categories that are granted these rights, such as the people enslaved by the slaveholders who wrote and signed the very Constitution he refers to. These exclusions perpetuate presently through more covert mechanisms, particularly in the legal legibility of non-white bodies. Biden articulates an American history that "disconnects the study of slavery from immigration studies of Asians and Latinos; the histories of gender, sexuality, and women is often separated from the study of race" (Lowe 35). The liberal humanism that incites this disconnect also attempts to preclude the possibility of cross-racial worker solidarity, and in fact buttresses racial divide. The

[43] Remarks by President Biden at Signing of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act | The White House

COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act does so through the guise of eliminating "hate" against "Asians," broadly construed.

This hate crime bill centers policing as the answer to stopping "hate," which can, at first glance, seem to be favorable legislation that can offer legal protection. However, as we have seen with the Georgia hate crimes law, such legislation makes little, if any difference in the aftermath of an already committed "hate crime." It also does little to prevent incidents of targeted violence in the first place, and increased policing has historically led to more arrests and prosecution of racialized, particularly Black, people. As such, this carceral approach covertly capitalizes on anti-Black sentiment in Asian communities and offers the "solution" of a bolstered police state. Simone Browne, in her book *Dark Matters*, reminds us of disproportionate mass incarceration in the United States, where "Black men between the ages of twenty and twenty-four are imprisoned at a rate *seven times higher* than white men of that age group" (Browne 13, emphasis mine). In the face of this unevenness, it is no surprise that the Georgia hate crimes bill does not apply to white men like Robert Long, and the bolstered policing from policies such as this will invariably preserve whiteness over any other category that they claim to protect.

Racial Triangulation and Surveillance

Legislation such as the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act thus serves to signal the U.S. as a multicultural, egalitarian nation as well as to support the racial divide between minority groups with the increased policing that invariably targets Black communities. The preservation of whiteness and the maintenance of systems of white privilege operate through the multidimensionality of racial stratification. Racial triangulation theory, proposed by Claire Jean Kim, addresses the ways in which different groups are racialized in reference to one another,

arguing that Asian Americans have been "triangulated vis-à-vis whites and in a 'field of racial positions'" (Kim 106). This field, she explains, has two axes, the "superior/inferior" axis and the "insider/foreigner axis." The superior/inferior axis refers to the "processes of 'relative valorization,' through which the white dominant group valorizes one subordinate racial group relative to another. The figure of the "model minority" emerges from these processes and has been weaponized to disregard the discrimination that Black communities face and their call for racial equality. The insider/foreigner axis of racial triangulation explains the processes of "civic ostracism," whereby the white dominant group casts one subordinate racial group as "immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership" (Kim 107). In other words, this axis constructs the extent to which Asian Americans as a racial group are considered to be unassimilable as perpetual foreigners, as opposed to being "insiders."

As such, hate crime law may not "protect" marginalized groups like the victims of the Atlanta spa shootings, but is mobilized as a means to legitimize and call for more police funding, in turn invoking more violence against and between marginalized groups at the hands of the state. Outside of increased police presence, hate crime legislation, including the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, establishes systems of hate crime reporting and data collection of such reports. According to the Department of Justice, the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act

> …establishes grants for states to create state-run crimes reporting hotlines. It also authorizes grants for states and local governments to implement the National Incident-Based Reporting System and to conduct law enforcement activities or crime reduction programs to prevent, address, or respond to hate crimes.

The vague language of bills such as this reflect and reify the slippery nature of the term "hate" and what it encompasses, and in turn, how to address it. Data collection of hate crimes can

initially be an appealing strategy for impacted communities to document evidence and have a metric to demonstrate discrimination, bias, and violence against said communities. However, data collection by law enforcement in service of policing and surveilling communities of color is rooted in histories of anti-Black racism and in fact incorporated into contemporary surveillance technologies. Browne notes how these technologies are constituted by digital epidermalization, through which "'suspect' citizens, trusted travelers, prisoners, welfare recipients, and others are having their bodies informationalized by way of biometric surveillance" (Browne 128). These same data infrastructures are also used to deport Asian immigrants, further entrenching notions of Asians and Asian Americans as threats and perpetual outsiders; data practices of collection therefore become a self-enforcing loop.

Conclusion

These entrenched technologies (literal and figurative) of the state have the capacity to essentialize identities and weaponize them in discursive ways. Demonstrating how the state is bolstered by the project of identity politics, Jasbir Puar writes extensively about the ways in which intersectionality has strayed from Crenshaw's initial conceptualization of intersectionality as an analytic lens of power. In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Puar explains how intersectionality reproduces identity categories that reify juridical structures, in turn shoring up neoliberalism and imperialism. Puar suggests that intersectionality "is a tool of diversity management and a mantra of liberal multiculturalism, intersectionality colludes with the disciplinary apparatus of the state— census, demography, racial profiling, surveillance—in that 'difference' is encased within a structural container that simply wishes the messiness of identity into a formulaic grid" (Puar 212). This argument manifests in the COVID-19 Hate

Crimes Act and its vague reasoning to buttress law enforcement activities and "crime reduction programs." Puar conceptualizes intersectionality as co-opted by liberal multiculturalism, which in turn affirms state recognition and validates state authority. She writes specifically of the disciplinary mechanisms of the state mentioned above, apparatuses such as census and hate crime data and surveillance, demonstrating that intersectionality as a (neo)liberal tool reifies systems of power that place vulnerable populations in positions of marginalization and harm in the first place. However, despite Puar's compelling argument, intersectionality continues to circulate in both scholarly and public circles in generative ways.

This tension is particularly apparent in discussions not only of legal recognition and protection, but also in how we conceptualize justice, particularly within the U.S. judicial imaginary. The question that then emerges points to how intersectionality can be used to not only critique modes of power, but to demand the dismantling of these systems that do not protect vulnerable bodies. What does "justice" look like for the killings of Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Yong Ae Yue, Xiaojie Tan, and Daoyou Feng? Similar questions have been raised in the wake of recent police murders and brutality of countless, named and even more unnamed Black victims of state violence. State protection and carceral punishment go hand in hand in (re)producing cycles of harm. How can we ask for justice and protection from the very system that does the harm? Law enforcement and carceral data may guise itself as the solution for safety for racialized and gendered violence, but we most look beyond the "political and juridical space of the [liberal humanist] tradition. We must reckon that present contests over life and death of the "human" are often only legible in terms of those spaces still authorized by liberal political humanism" (Lowe 41). This reckoning insists on feeling backward, refusing to coalesce into totalizing narratives of identity, of history, and of the present and future

themselves. This reckoning insists on a melancholic turn toward the past to recognize how categories of difference have become insulated and weaponized in service of the dominant. Puar similarly urges for the need for an alternate account of power that

> …demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification: you become an identity, yes, but also *timelessness* works to consolidate the fiction of a seamless stable identity in every space (212, emphasis mine).

This "stabilizing" of identity across both space and time gesture toward the ways in which the teleological accounts of historical records not only insinuate the faith in the narrative of redemption and progress, but also eliminates the ability to register loss. To return to David Eng and Shinhee Han's conceptualization of racial melancholia, this timelessness eclipses a melancholic relationality to the world, the registration of loss, but the unrecognizability of what exactly has been lost.

Concluding Remarks

This thesis has explored different conditions that give rise to racial melancholia, in particular through the theme of Vietnamese diaspora and oceanic media in Ocean Vuong's work, the totalizing logics of racial capital and globalization in Ling Ma's novel, and the multicultural discourse of modern liberal humanism in the face of the Atlanta spa shootings. I frame racial melancholia alongside a politics of feeling backward, outlined by Heather Love. My engagement with feeling backward is informed by the desire to articulate a critique of the (neo)liberalism and its multicultural logics to enfold racial and sexual minorities into its incessant project of individual identity politics and consumerism. Feeling backward acknowledges negative affect and the psychic wounds of social inequalities, to remember the affective consequences of historical losses in the face of neoliberal polemics of individualism.

I completed this thesis on the eve of the anniversary of the March 16th Atlanta spa shootings. Despite national attention and political action such as the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, this past year has seen more attacks against Asian people throughout the U.S. How much does reporting and collecting hate crime data do? Data and statistics gathered from such reporting distributes federal funding for more policing or creating dedicated task forces but has yet to demonstrate that such initiatives actually minimize or prevent these incidents from happening in the first place. This final chapter in this thesis has attempted to illustrate that law enforcement ultimately protects and serves the needs and desires of the state, which veils its own systemic violence in its insistence of punitive justice and emphasis on racism as a personal affliction.

In the few months of 2022 alone, two disparate but both violent deaths of Asian women in New York City have been used as a call for increased police presence throughout in the city, while also demonizing the homeless population. The first horrific incident occurred on January 15th, where Michelle Alyssa Go, aged 40, was shoved in front of an incoming train in a subway station in Times Square. According to the New York Times article covering the attack, it was seemingly random, was committed by "a man with a history of mental illness who may have been homeless" (Closson and Newman). The article goes on to discuss the city's long concerns regarding its large homeless population, many of whom seek refuge in the subway system, describing how city officials have spoken about and handled the recent waves of violence in subway stations. It reports that "In April 2020, Governor Andrew Cuomo held up a front page showing homeless people sprawled across the seats of otherwise empty trains and declared it 'disgusting'."[44] In 2021, Mayor Bill de Blasio deployed a total of 750 police personnel to patrol the subway system. On February 13, 2022, Christina Yuna Lee, aged 35, was followed into her apartment in Chinatown and stabbed to death. Her killer was also a homeless man who has a record of misdemeanor arrests[45] and was arraigned on an assault charge. Like Go's murderer, he is one of many examples of the failures of the city, highlighting that its policies serve the privileged few and predictably cause further harm than aid to those who end up being victims of a preventable crime.

With crime persisting despite increased police presence, and crime being used to bolster policing, this positive feedback loop should make apparent not the crime rates in homeless populations, but the state's disregard for them and its fundamental unwillingness to provide

[44] Woman Dies After Being Pushed Onto Subway Tracks in Times Square - The New York Times (nytimes.com)
[45] Murder of Christina Yuna Lee Sends Shockwaves Through Chinatown Community | The Lo-Down : News from the Lower East Side (thelodownny.com)

housing as a basic human right. Placing blame on the homeless is a strategic diversion from the responsibility and accountability the government body has to its subjects, not only disavowing victims like Michelle Go and Christina Yuna Lee, but also affirming policing as a punitive institution.

The melancholic politics of feeling backward are often accused of passivity in contemporary utility and political action. However, this thesis attempts to demonstrate feeling backward as a gestural refusal, a commitment to an anti-state and anti-capitalist politics, not a complete absence of political utility. Love writes,

> Tarrying with this negativity is crucial; at the same time, the aim is to turn grief into grievance – to address the larger social structures, the regimes of domination, that are at the root of such pain. But real engagement with these issues means coming to terms with the temporality, the specific structure of grief, and allowing these elements of negative affect to transform our understanding of politics. We need to develop a vision of political agency that incorporates the damage we hope to repair (Love 151).

The practice of feeling backward demonstrates an attempt to position political agency alongside negative affect, perhaps suggesting the priority of a framework of ethics rather than politics. In the *Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng speaks to the difficulty of these tensions, describing that "This distinction may finally feed into the difference between grief and grievance, with grief belonging to the realm of thinking and living with loss, while grievance belongs to the realm of accountability. But the frequent conflation of grief and grievance underscores how important it is also to imagine a relationship between ethics and politics" (Cheng 195). Feeling backward creates a space (and time) through which to become attuned to the ways in which manifestations of political progress and the world they operate in can continue to be left wanting.

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