

“Infiltrate as Cells”

The Biopolitically Ethical Subject of *sybil unrest*

Rita Wong and Larissa Lai's book-length, collaborative poem *sybil unrest* is a witty, often trenchantly funny repartee on maintaining a resistant spirit in an environment of aggressive globalized consumerism. When they declare that their mission is to “[throw] the enlightenment individual ‘i’ into question and hopefully expose its ideological underpinnings,” however, Wong and Lai demonstrate the seriousness of their project and their commitment to an activist, radical poetics in the avant-garde tradition. “Into this unstable subjectivity,” they write, “we attempt to reinject questions of gender, race and class, as well as geography, power and hope” (127).¹ In their pursuit of a strategy of ethical (self)-representation, however, Wong and Lai creatively exceed their own critical framing of their work and produce a critique of “human” as *the* species and *the* identity category whose ideological underpinnings inform and are informed by Euro- and androcentric post-Enlightenment humanist values.

Lai and Wong's poem is a sharp critique of twenty-first century local-global scales of capital flow. Engaging specifically with the avant-garde strategy of using the lower-case “i” as a destabilized proxy for the lyric “I,” Wong and Lai bring the techniques of avant-garde formalism and the sensibility of the transnational subject together in their project to “re-subject” (53) the “i,” and provocatively propose the figure of the Asian female body as a more robust figure of humanist universality than, say, Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man.² This playful provocation is not quite a call to a representational *coup* (which might see a well-proportioned “Huaxian Woman” suddenly appear on the covers of anatomy textbooks

around the world), but an illumination of the cultural specificity of holisms underwriting discourses of species and interspecies interaction.

In this paper I read Wong and Lai's *sybil unrest* as contending that media depersonalizations of the flesh, spectacularized through images of particular raced and gendered bodies, are a refraction of the relation of capitalist discourse to living material. *sybil unrest* investigates "the personal" and "the multiple" at manifold scales of technoscientific and linguistic taxonomy, and interrogates the relationship of the lyric and humanist "I," the avant-garde resistant "i," and the collaborative "we" to other terms that delineate holisms of living form, such as "the cell," "the organism," and "the human," holisms which they then fold back into marked terms like "she" or "Asian." Wong and Lai start from a shared ethical vision in different literary discourses and build toward the "defiant drag" of their cell-level politics (126). By seeing the dynamics that socially construct subject-object relations inherent in constructions of the boundary of organism vis-à-vis organic and inorganic "material," I argue, Wong and Lai destabilize the frame of the "human" as containing a single self, or single organic unit. They ask how the human organism survives despite being relentlessly "organized" into capitalist systems by language and other media in a race-, class-, and gender-inflected late-capitalist geopolitical landscape.

Cumulatively, *sybil unrest* proposes political action and resistance as occurring at the moments where the subject literally composes herself—nutritionally, affectively, and narratively—as living material, functionally interdependent on and with all other living material on the planet. In *sybil unrest* Wong and Lai suggest that human relation needs to be thought at the scale of intracellular relation, and that collaborative poetry stages this human relation as energetic flow between bodies and text, resisting conceptual closure around the terms organic and inorganic.

"i" resurrect "oui": communities behind the "i" as a Wong-Lai joint

"This poem began in renga spirit," Wong and Lai tell us, referring to the ancient genre of Japanese poetry in which two or more poets contribute stanzas to a sequence of "linked verses" (127). Inspired by a collaborative piece the authors encountered at a Kootenay School of Writing event in 2003, *sybil unrest* is a "back and forth conversation conducted by email over the course of several months" (127). This "conversation" develops the authors' shared response to witnessing, over international news broadcasts in Hong Kong, the catalytic beginnings of both the SARS crisis³ and the American

invasions of Iraq. But the book is not simply a conversation between two writers; it is a conversation between conversations—particularly between the question of voice and formal innovation in avant-garde poetics and the question of voice and the political audibility of the subaltern. I will sketch out *sybil unrest*'s location amidst these discourses before pursuing the analysis of how the book's take on subjectivity advances them both.

A reader might assume that the page breaks in *sybil unrest* indicate where one author's voice ends and another's begins, but the text offers no confirmation. Some stylistic choices stay constant across the page divides, like the critically astute, yet irreverent and paronomastic tone:

overdetermined and overseen
 seer sucker
 the unstitched garment puckers
 the subaltern cannot peek

 her futures gambled on the casino market
 stuck in the loop o
 stealth martins, lockheed dupes
 bombard e-bay
 trickle down eco-anomie (10-11)

The form of *sybil unrest* is a “unified dialogue” where the “voice” of the poem is imaginatively dispersed across two authorial bodies, a strategy which raises the question of where boundaries of voice, identity, and authorship lie. The extended to-and-fro meditation blends the “cyborg poetics”—addressing discourses of technology, citizenship, reproduction, biopower, and global capitalism—for which Lai is known, and the “ecopoetics”—connecting issues of land and water use, First Nations political representation, environmentalism and linguistic and cultural alliance—for which Wong is recognized. I hesitate to parse the distinct preoccupations of each author, as I don't wish to suggest that either author's earlier work “lacked” an appreciation for the “other” concerns I tag to each respective name. My hope is to demonstrate that in its skepticism about the integrity of the “I,” *sybil unrest* embodies not simply a dialogue between two subjects or sets of discourses, but is a simultaneously occupied space in which *audiences* that might have understood themselves or their spaces of reception as distinct (say, sci-fi readers and eco-critics) might recognize themselves in the company of unexpected fellow readers.

With its “collaborative, conversational values and a patience for duration,” the book enacts what Joan Retallack calls a “poethics,” an approach to innovation in poetics that “recognizes the degree to which the chaos of

world history, of all complex systems, makes it imperative that we move away from models of cultural and political agency lodged in isolated heroic acts and simplistic notions of cause and effect" (3). Wong and Lai join a number of Canadian and American poets, including M. NourbeSe Philip, Myung Mi Kim, and Harryette Mullen, in extending the avant-garde tradition by using its formal strategies to advance a feminist and resistantly racialized politics, and like these women, find their concerns often overlapping with those largely feminist-identified poets, including Rachel Zolf, Sina Queyras, Jena Osman, and Juliana Spahr, whose formal innovations and investigative poetics engage critically with this century's networked structures of power, economics, and politics.

Wong and Lai's work also follows the feminist collaborations of the previous generation of Vancouver poets like Betsy Warland and Daphne Marlatt, who once perplexed critics with "the fact that [their] individual authorships are not clearly marked in the text" (qtd. in Mix 293). Like Warland and Marlatt's, Lai and Wong's collaborative writing "subverts other cultural constructs of self and other, inside and outside" and "by occupying this in-between space, is inherently political, calling attention to the processes of marginalization and canonization" (Mix 293).

Lai and Wong are further deeply informed by Roy Miki's important interrogation of how to practise effective literary and political agency when working to have a voice within institutions and media networks that are themselves "sites for domestication and normalization" of the challenge to homogenizing political systems and aesthetic norms (118-19). Lai and Wong's "attempt" is a practice of Miki's concept of "Asiancy," which called for "a critical methodology . . . that can articulate difference in such a way that the very notion of 'otherness,' which Western thought has used to centralize 'selfness' as source, hierarchically prior, becomes obsolete as a way of defining people and culture" (123). Wong and Lai's poetic grappling is a critical grappling with how such agency functions when practiced by women who have secured some position and influence within these systems and institutions. One of *sybil unrest's* secondary questions is "[h]ow is 'Asiancy' different in this moment than it was a decade ago?" (Lai, "Labour" 164).

Expounding their own collaborative ethics, Marlatt and Warland declared that "action, political action, calls for a sense of 'we'" (qtd. in Mix 295). A generation later, Wong and Lai declare: "'We' gesture to how the personal sparks this dialogue" (127). "They" put scare quotes around their "we" to mark their hesitation to employ the usual pronoun for the deindividualized,

dialogic process of their poetic and human interaction. Wong and Lai are, *après* Miki, looking for something beyond the redress of racist disenfranchisement within a national politics or for inclusion in the Canadian Anglocentric canon. Ambitiously, they play at “redressing” the very flesh of the body, by pointing to the cultural tailorings of that body’s “selfness” and “humanness,” and suggest that the conceptual deunification of “the self” that has been, in many ways, the triumph of postcolonial theory and avant-garde literary practices, might be brought to bear on the category of the biological human.

By beginning with a quest to “expose the ideological underpinnings [of] an enlightenment ‘i’” (127), Wong and Lai take up one of the main aims of the poetic avant-garde⁴ and engage with Roy Miki at the moment of his textual question: “am ‘I’ the subject of this sentence? Or am ‘i’ sentenced by its historicity?” (200). Lai and Wong’s conversation enacts an ethical singularity, a pair of “i’s” testing out the politics of saying “we” and a “we” reflecting on the conditions of its coming-into-being. Miki, following Judith Butler, reminds us that both an unproblematized “I” and an “i” articulated through the discourses of postcolonial theory or avant-garde aesthetic are each expressions of a discursive limit that “precedes and conditions” the “subject,” and that “the limit is never static and inflexible but always ‘subject to’ reinscriptions that disturb and transfigure the social relations of power” (200).

The heart of Wong and Lai’s project is a staging of that subjectivity and an attempt to intervene in those social relations. They take their turn at confronting the “profound complications posed by creative and critical methodologies that attempt to encounter and represent subjectivity,” while keeping in mind Gayatri Spivak’s exhortation to subjects to establish an “ethical singularity” with the fellow subjectivities one encounters and enter an ethical relation involving both “responsibility and accountability” (Miki 199).

Bell tolls in thrall
 It rings for ‘we’
 Our i’s make a circle

 Subject flourishes
 A ‘they who can’t see’
 By the dawn’s early light (81)⁵

Wong and Lai use recognizable strategies of “unmarked” avant-garde poetic movements, that is, strategies developed through poetic discourses that theorize subjectivity without attention to the human subject’s uninterrupted performance of race and gender. They use formal approaches like a disjointed

"projective" sensibility in line and breath, intertextual collage, and a fragmented, documentary-style reportage in their own grappling with relations of subjectivity, language, and power. The aim of the avant-garde has never been to absolutely negate the subject, as Mario Moroni has written, but to change the way subjects perceive themselves and others: "One may say that the avant-garde questioned Western subject-centred reason, but not to criticize it abstractly as a philosophical notion, rather in order to transform it constructively, in the prospect of a socio-anthropological change from idealistic self-assured reason to intersubjective reason" (4-5). Wong and Lai's successful simultaneous development of two threads of engagement with the terms of Enlightenment subjectivity, the broadly postcolonial and the formalist avant-garde, one marked "formally resistant" and another marked "formally innovative," suggests the possibility of a compatible vision of ethical relation stemming from both, despite the deeply differing politics of language informing Moroni's unmarked "intersubjective reason" and Spivak's "ethical singularity."

Looking for "we" in a "recovery of our collective / cyborg consciousness"

The ethical and conceptual productivity of *sybil unrest* emerges from the intertwining of two personal reactions to the explosive global spread of both military violence and the SARS virus. If Lai reacts in line with her penchant for investigating the far limits of the subject and its agency, and Wong reacts in keeping with her deep curiosity around how subjects share the experience of subjectification,⁶ their multiple, restless subject emerges amidst their shared perspectives on the body as a kind of limit-space moving through the borders of the militarized and globally corporatized world. Whether we track Wong's lookout for the natural, which she discovers is everywhere and nowhere, sprouting forms like genetically-modified crops, mutated fish, and telecommunicative blackberries, or Lai's personal disinclination to abandon identity politics completely in her taking up positions in racially unmarked discussions of writing and technocorporeal interface, their conversation makes visible a constructed, yet unmappable boundary between categories of organic or natural material and technoscientific product. Lai and Wong talk themselves into a linguistic jam, a communications snarl, somewhat similar to where Donna Haraway found herself when she tried to "tell" her social reality and the reality of women's experience in the late twentieth century and found she needed an ironic fiction, the non-myth of the cyborg, to reproduce her reality as an idea. Haraway remarks:

In the traditions of “Western” science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other—the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination. (*Cyborgs* 150)

The textual “i’s” in *sybil unrest* flicker in and out of understanding their own selves/bodies/“i’s” as cyborgs and as commodities. Like Haraway, Wong and Lai understand imaginative freedoms and possibilities for reproducing both bodies and idea(l)s to be at stake in the relation between organism and machine, or put another way, between natural and technoscientific, and want to dream of a relation between these concepts other than the usual border struggle.

nerves want a happy ending
organism organizes
orgasmic orangutangs
dreamt the experiment was a just a dream
dreamt i was a butterfly drowned in butter
dreamt i was man
codes switched
helix froze over
i dream of genes (12)

Their “i” is an “organism [that] organizes,” a dreaming orangutan, wondering where the boundaries of her own policing must lie in order keep the possibilities for her own material survival and material influence alive. What is at stake in thinking of oneself as an organism, or as an orangutan, or as a human? What language is there for understanding ourselves as organisms other than species discourse—or religion—to differentiate the human organism from other organisms? Suddenly the border war shifts to a front that seems to have less to do with technology than with taxonomy, one that seems to invoke the very mythic, ontological act of naming: the borders, perhaps enacted by nothing more powerful than The Word, between conceptualizing the human as a form and “other” living beings as forms.

In her 2004 essay “Future Asians: Migrant Speculations, Repressed History and Cyborg Hope,” Lai describes the problem of trying to grasp the complexities of politics and of the relation of the subject to “the international capitalist new world order” as similar to the plight of the blind men in the familiar story, who try to know an elephant, when each man can only reach out and touch one distinct part of its anatomy, and that “there’s the added handicap of looking through the eyepiece of a video camera, in the sense that everything we perceive is what the mass media gives us” (170).

sybil unrest takes up the challenge of not only representing but also "unsettling" that elephant. The "i"-as-organism, who might be the "i"-as-Asian, is considered against the backdrop of "the influx of Asian capital, goods and populations into the urban core of Canadian cities" while also pushing to "consider the flow of capital, goods and populations marked 'Asian' within a larger geopolitical context." By so doing, the "i's" boundaries, that is, the boundaries of personal identity, are illuminated as motivated by the same self-organizing, incorporating interests as national borders, which themselves function like "membrane[s] that [are] sometimes shamelessly porous, and at other times viciously and unfairly impermeable" (219).

The outcome of their experiment brings the subject into relief against a world order envisioned through a posthumanist lens. Wong and Lai's vision of power relations, and of the multiple scales—ranging from global to cellular—at which state power is enacted, is informed by the Foucauldian idea of biopower, which sees hegemonic or state interest intervening in the lives of subjects at the level of their familial and sexual relations and their access to the means to life (including food, clean water, or medical treatment). Following posthumanist theorists like Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Giorgio Agamben, Wong and Lai poetically theorize the politics by which the biopolitically self-aware subject can stage resistance and move into more ethical and productive intersubjective relation. They do so by staging an "i"-aware, intersubjective response to their perception of global movements of virus and violence, a perception mediated through the privately-owned, segmented space of mass-media narrative.

"i'm f--'d / i'm loving it": the ambivalently multiple subject of Wong and Lai's *i-topia*

Lai and Wong embrace the avant-garde technique of collage, including bits of text from a broad spectrum of cultural production, to represent the subject's perceptual relation to word and form: "Phrases and rhythms, sometimes skewed, float in and out of *sybil unrest* from many places" (127). Sound bytes and memes culled from such diverse sources as Chuang Tze, The Rolling Stones, Roy Orbison, Judith Butler, Northrop Frye, and from nursery rhymes and commercial jingles, are selected, sometimes modified, and woven into the stream of dialogue:

I cry and I try and I cry and I try
I can't get no truce
But don't get stuck in sad inaction
.....

Love the spin you're in
Anything you want
You've caught it (90-91)

The fragmentary aesthetic of collage works in a tradition of avant-garde leftism that values a democracy of literary reference points, originating anywhere on the spectrum from “low” to “high” culture. This strategy traditionally addresses its readership as a broad collectivity, an anti-elitist but literate “we,” hailed as such by the breadth of cultural discourses in which the reader is invited and assumed to participate. Against this collectivizing formal gesture, Wong and Lai’s ambivalent semantic “we” signals the crisis of strategies of belonging in a shifting media and political landscape in which corporated, technologized interfaces mediate social network formation and participation.

In *sybil unrest*, the string of textual fragments mimics the fragmented nature of narrativized subjectivities and is a refusal to produce the effect of a singular and knowable authorial univocality. It also formally signals the logic of deunification, of action on the body at multiple scales, by which corporate and state communications in late capitalism exert a biopower over subjects.⁷ Wong and Lai hesitate to invoke the term over which both Obama (“Yes We Can”) and the Kielburgers (“From Me to We”) have effectively established a kind of brand dominion. A majority of media consumers have already been exposed to and brought into relation with these “we’s.” Wong and Lai’s readership and non-readership have already been addressed into a collectivity, and the use of collage in this context reframes the technique as a savvy mimesis of the barrage of fragmented, interpellative textuality (one could read *sybil unrest* as an aggregation of tweetable intelligences) through which twenty-first-century media literacy and subjectivity emerge.

Wong and Lai nonetheless resist one ideal of collage and fragmentary poetics. By bringing poetic language onto the same page as language from advertising, political theory, scientific, and historical discourses, they are not levelling all utterance to a fully “democratized” state of relation. For Wong and Lai, there is still a political, or at least ethical, primacy to the personal: “‘We’ gesture to how the personal sparks this dialogue,” they insist (127). Lai and Wong are sensitive to the violence, neutralization, or augmentation of political significance that de- or re-contextualizing fragments of text can engender, especially when divorcing or devaluing writing from its personal contexts. “I found the notion of the death of the author particularly annoying,” Lai has written, “as it seemed to be widely in play at precisely

the moment many marginalized people were finally beginning to find their voice" ("Future Asians"). Wong has noted, commenting on her own practice of incorporating fragments of different texts into her work, that it is important to think "about the power differentials between writers and texts," so that "we can draw a line between what is appropriation and quoting" (qtd. in Eichhorn and Milne 347).

The fragmentary strategy allows the personal "i" to alight in the text as inattributable to any particular person, or even, necessarily, to human form, while "I" still remains indicative of a state of consciousness and spatiotemporal uniqueness that expresses itself as such. Other subjects of the sentence fragment modify verbs as though they themselves were "subjects" (for example: "nerves want a happy ending" (12), "we wave our fronds" (18), "ruptured cell cooperates" (106), and "every environ atoms its national interest" [110]). Personified and sitting in sufficiently similar fragmented syntaxes and lateral associations to the "i's" of *sybil unrest*, organisms and organs are "fragments" of the body and of the environmental whole that act with a stimulus/response agency mirroring, and metonymic of, the encounter of the human subject with her environment.

Moroni might describe the text's resistance to a default human-to-object relation in its subject-to-object syntaxes as "simultaneism" or an Apollinarian "orphanism." This resistance codes a proposed position of the subject in respect to the sphere of external objects in the tradition of the avant-garde:

The presence of the subject—or in the case of written texts, of the poetic "I"—at the moment of naming the object, is characterized neither by a sense of self assurance and centrality, nor by a total dependence on a chain of signifiers, which would leave no room for an understanding of the object itself. The subject becomes, rather, "pluralized,"—one may also say "dynamically multiplied" in many points of view which, all at the same time, approach the object. (7)

Lai and Wong, ever aware of power relations, use simultaneism to divest their observed objects and subjects, including gender and racial markers, from naturalized perceptions of intersubjectivity shaped by syntax. The point is not to restage the relationship between two words and their setting-in-relation by language as completely arbitrary, or call for a syntactical radical anarchy, but to perform the relation both as dynamic and obviously ideologically structured. What is the relation of "i" to another "i" in this economy when the "I" is but "a tissue a tissue [and] we all fall / for the dollar" (67)?

The subject-object relation is for Lai and Wong an assertion, in constant potentiality for reassertion and reification. This dynamic is, on another

level, their statement around poetic form and politics: as key poetic and political social formations are in constant flux, poetic form and the potential for political subversion are themselves in a relation in constant need of reassertion and reconstruction. Further, Wong and Lai suggest that the multiplicity of the subject in the context of capitalist consumerism is a multiplicity of moments of subjectification/identification constituted by encounters with things and brands as much as with other people.

hailed wonder of being several
while she goes on dispensing
business-as-usual
another she sits
in silent mourning
another she
actively seeks distraction (58)

“i’m fido,” (55) says someone speaking of mobility, “i joy my fake id,” (34) says another. And elsewhere: “bulls and purses blink an i” (11). The flickering “i” arises in moments of ambivalent acceptance of the points of agency within a system of capital flows impossible to escape: to purchase, or to resist purchasing? That is the question. Or, in other words, “if you don’t play, you’re still playing” (112).

One man’s “—” is another man’s “i”: the avant-garde subject as globalized consciousness

This mass-media mishmash of information and capital flows, pulsing through superconductors and capillaries, is Wong and Lai’s *now*, “reconstituted,” as Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy called for, “into rhizomatic formations that embrace difference” (26). Butling and Rudy’s use of the term rhizomatic invokes the call of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to dehierarchize our psychological and linguistic models of intersubjective relations. Much of Wong and Lai’s strategy can be understood as rhizomatic, building “transversal communications between different lines [which] scramble the genealogical trees” (Deleuze and Guattari 12). One of the “trees” they scramble is the rooting of power in networks of Western European white male bodies, exposing that structure of thinking as “a power takeover in the multiplicity by the signifier or a corresponding subjectification” (Deleuze and Guattari 9).

In *sybil unrest*, easy alignments of racialization with identification, or marginalization, are knotted and tangled as articulations of racialized and gendered experience inform declarations of power and engagement—as

well as disaffection—within a global economy. Here Asian “girls” are both silenced images and “the one who speaks” (124). Here subalterns “yowl against catcallers,” and though they dwell “in the prison house of language” (116), they nonetheless “love the spin [they’re] in” (90). Wong and Lai move us through assertions ranging from full-on anti-capitalist tirade to ironic admissions that “our beloved amazon / gushes effusive / i’m loving it,” in a space where “goddesses sign in triplicate / the pleasures of being multiple” (57).

Charles Bernstein has famously written that

the problems of group affiliation (the neolyric ‘we’) pose as much of a problem for poetry as do assertions of Individual Voice. If poems can’t speak directly for an author, neither can they speak directly for a group . . . Each poem speaks not only many voices but many groups and poetry can investigate the construction of these provisional entities in and through and by language. If individual identity is a false front, group identity is a false fort. (8-9)

What for Bernstein is a question of aesthetics and a critique of “authenticity” is for Wong and Lai further complicated by the challenge of producing work that acknowledges the material consequences of marginalization from these “false forts” without being accused of constructing new ones:

this little piggy loves the free market economy
in the guise of democracy
cries we we we
all the way to the bank (16)

Exposing the same “we” that describes the collaborative movement of *sybil unrest* as a term masking individualist profit agendas under a common sign, Lai and Wong confront the provisionality of collective identity that Bernstein identifies as a problem too easily solved by the brand-loyalty logic of late capitalism. *sybil unrest* suggests that amid shifting post-9/11 geopolitics, ethno-nationalist identities are commodities of shifting value, marketable and wearable as signs of moment-to-moment big brand affiliation. The lower-case “i” becomes the mark of the “individual” wired-in consumer when that upstart (start-up?), anti-proprietary glyph gets “bought out” by big multinational re-presentation.

Further, Lai and Wong’s engagement with Hong Kong as consumerist landscape expands the “larger geopolitical context”—the “we” in which avant-garde investigation of the “I” locates itself. Lai and Wong’s attention to the circulation of Asian and female images and labour in a global economy and in the Western imaginary demonstrates their awareness of inhabiting positions of simultaneous social privilege and dislocation. They reintroduce

into the avant-garde imaginary the imaginary of a post-unification Hong Kong, signalled by the 一, 二, and 三 that mark the three-part organizing structure of *sybil unrest*.

This gesture in geopolitical context radically reorients the terms of power and subjectification subsumed in the history of deployment and rejection of the “I.” Suddenly, the avant-garde’s anti-“I” idealization of “self-presence under erasure” is revealed as the position always already assumed by the linguistic outsider, the ironic position inhabited by a robust global multiplicity of subjects misread by a culturally “self”-centred aesthetic. The oppositional vector of Wong and Lai’s art aims itself not simply at Canadian or American centres of cultural or identity production, but more forcefully at the multilingual discourses of capital flow, including the community of readers for whom 一, 二, 三 are basic marks of meaning.⁸ At this historical moment, that community, that consumer and labour force of a billion-plus bodies is anything but politically marginal.

The lower-case “i” still appears in *sybil unrest* as a self-diminutizing gesture in sympathy with working-class and radical poets of the 1960s who decapitalized the Eurocentric humanist “I” and rejected the Romantic, individualist poetic genius. But in the geopolitical space articulated by the poem, this diminution also camouflages the viral potentialities of this little “i’s” enthusiasms, the threat of its social connectedness, undetectable or at least unregulated by media of mass visibility, and the self-awareness of this “i” as itself a node in an “iconomic” (13) system. Suddenly, to hold 一, 二, 三 at ninety degrees is to see the capital potential of an aggregation of | || |||’s. Suddenly the ideological underpinnings of the humanist “I” are the ideological underpinnings of an English-language “|” which must be theorized in another orthography, iconography, and grammar entirely. Suddenly, any language-based critique of global capitalism that confines itself to an English-language episteme must acknowledge its own limitations in addressing, either conceptually or affectively, the transnational and translingual space of the postmodern subject and its art.

Wong and Lai foreground the gendered, sexualized subject in the rhizomatic media saturation of *sybil unrest*’s now and produce an intense, affective reader engagement without deploying a strategy of personal narrative—there is no one “voice” to sympathize with—yet they still point to the individual, perceptive presence in each body. *sybil unrest* understands the indistinguishable logics of domination and commodification that operate on and through bodies, logics that constrict or compel the movement of wage slaves, migrant labourers, sex workers, factory workers, and domestic labourers alike.

"More than bodies arrive": "redressing" the human(ist) subject as mark(et)ed anatomy

sybil unrest's formal strategy, enacting such clear allegiance to the forms of avant-garde practice, allow Wong and Lai to place the Asian female's "marketed anatomy" (43) into a discourse already historically supportive of working-class resistance to an elite class. In solidarity with such movements, Lai and Wong expose the "sodomarketism" (11) of the global economy by considering the ideological work borne by the figure of the Asian female. She is both "mistress masters secret sex" (8) and the "napalm naked" (125) icon of suffering, submission, and infantilization (especially as rendered in Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of Phan Ti Kim Phuc). Lai and Wong locate the authorship of these images not in the abstract space of ideology but in the legal person of a corporation: "Dow [who] sold napalm [and] bought union carbide . . . belongs to these icons," they write (125).

Wong and Lai expose the "marks" of Asianness or femaleness as relations to a Western individualist ideal, but in response they neither work to modify avant-garde poetic form to reconstruct this relation, nor decry the centring of that ideal on a Western male body. Rather they model, through syntax and semantics, the refraction of logics of objectification and commodification that operate on and through vulnerable bodies of all races and genders through multiple nodes of global power. Co-opting the humanist logic by which one body stands in for the human, the "unmarked" body of *sybil unrest's* now is the mark(et)ed body, signalled by "girl" and "she" as much as by "i," and stands in for multiple subjectivities aiming for agency in the global economy:

from TSE to BSE
the bull market
surrounds
her tender lips . . .
vengeance
of the dispossessed
flash angry breasts
fossil fuels erotic offer
venous on the half shell (92)

The mark(et)ed body performs a work supplementary to the agential productivity channelled into alienated labour; the mark(et)ed body constrains its own energies into a presentation of being available for another's consumption; of a non-resistance that verges on strategic submission: "what [else]'s a girl to do?" (92). The lower-case "i" here signals both the self-demotion from consumer to consumed and the non-resistance, the "flash [of] angry breasts"

that seeks to accrue capital through self-styling as a luxury commodity. The shrewd subject survives by a bringing a performance of “I”-lessness to market forces, in a kind of auto-fetishization that cultivates a pose of goddess-like unattainability and self-as-consumable delicacy.

This survival tactic is not the reasoned surrender of a self-interested agency to the greater self-interest of cooperation and incorporation, or a humanist ethic of selflessness, by which “I” sacrifice an economically productive agency to an agency of service. The mark(et)ed anatomy is the body identifying as *contained* by the boundary constructed as “personal” within the discourse of “human capital,” that is *suppressed* through the term personal by a discourse that wants “the labour without the body” (20). It is the body and network of dependencies that produce, but do not appear on, a resumé; it is history that enters systems of capitalist information flow as medical data; it is the body and network of dependencies that produce the particular relation of language to human body called literature.

An epigraph from Rachel Zolf’s *Human Resources*, lifted from the *Harvard Business Review*, reads as follows: “Because literature concerns itself with the ambiguities of the human condition, it stands as a threat to the vitality of the business executive, who must at all times maintain a bias toward action” (3). The language suggests the “super-human” status that executives enjoy within the late-capitalist economy, *the* dominant status in the economy of sado-marketism that is vitally threatened by a self-consciousness of their inclusion within the full breadth of the human taxon. The body that knows itself to be conduit of and consumed by the system through which “anger markets management to white collars” (59), whether that “white collared” body be a racially white male or Asian female; the body that maintains an identity informed by literature’s dual interest in demythologizing (capitalist) fictions of the ideal self and reminding “how the personal sparks . . . dialogue” (127): this is a body in the space that capitalist resource discourse resentfully marks “human.”

For Wong and Lai, the “human” is a place imagined through the cladistic logic of biological taxonomy and is yet somehow beyond and constituent of the cladistic logic of corporate organizational structure. These are tree logics whose branches they snap and reorganize through their paronomastic play into new, Deleuzian “lines of segmentarity” (for example, the semantic units of their conversation) and “lines of deterritorialization” where units like “she” become aggregates of cells, or organs, or entry points for viruses. Lai and Wong remind us that evolutionary species discourse in the capitalist communications machine is variously deployed by cultural, genealogical,

and teleological narratives supporting capitalist economic values. Whether as a "tree of life" constructing "human" as its highest-reaching branch, or tree of Darwinian survivalism, in the elimination match of species, the "human" has been constructed as top competitor. For Wong and Lai, the "top of the food chain" is an obsolete ideological construct of centralized power to be exposed and critiqued, a fictional position in a naturalized narrative of transcendence and domination.

**"Immunoglobin's internal rehearsal mirrors / external encounter":
letting it all say "I"**

"i think therefore i ham," wisecracks Wong and Lai's minx (83), but her laughter "spills hunger greater than the sum of its larks" when the real practices of sexualization and objectification of the human in late-capitalist economies are considered. Cognizant of the problems of a poetics of giving voice as Bernstein described them, Wong and Lai choose to grant a posthumanist awareness to their flirtatious subject, to the mark(et)ed anatomy behind the "glossy crotchshot" (43). She is human and a (non- or species-) human: at once both Descartes' thinker and a wry, punning observer aware that she is yet, from many angles, just a piece of meat.

In the final pages of the third section of *sybil unrest*, which builds toward its end with a rising, symphonic tension, Lai and Wong make a decisive move around the question of subjectivity and voice:

the one who speaks is not the girl in the picture she is
every fish the acid river coughs up every eater of fish every arsenic atom pulsing or
poisoning every breath you take . . . every mushroom . . . every mycorrhizal
mat . . . every every (124)

"Fragmentation" already describes both the strategic diffusion of global flows of biopower, and the sense of dislocation and dispersal of loci of capitalist coercion on and through the body that Lai has developed in her work (Lee 94). By locating speech and a kind of human/ist wholeness, or unified voice, (the newly personalized "i") in the mark(et)ed body, *sybil unrest* ironically disperses that wholeness through an already dis-organized terrain, through a human body that in late-capitalist logic is already nothing but organs and cells and muscles and breasts and genes.

Wong and Lai's "i" is this dispersed "I," an agency distributed at a cell level through the body of the "human," which exists in a *now* where there is "no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism" (Haraway, *Cyborgs* 178). The "i" leaks out into the machines

the body uses, leaks out into the water that passes through the body, into the flesh that moves from animal to human, and to excrement in the same digestive operation. When the mark(et)ed body speaks, the organism speaks, organs speak, flesh speaks. When flesh speaks, meat speaks. When meat speaks, grass and hay and water speak. The global economy of *sybil unrest* is the global ecology. The human in this configuration is a “nervous organism” (44) in “collective forms sentient incident” (104) that is the *now*. Human is but a biological long now, or as Jeff Derksen might put it, “a long moment” (4), a temporality, an evolutionary radiation “from minuscule origins / to mysterious ends” (Wong and Lai 95).

By suggesting that the figure of an Asian female can stand for the unmarked “human,” and by suggesting an equivalence in the relation of unmarked-to-marked and humanist-to-nonhuman, Wong and Lai’s conversation in *sybil unrest* exposes the power politics at the heart of constructions of species identity. The question remains of how a human identity naturalized not as species dominance or evolutionary telos but as a particular form of “i” can inform an ethics of individuated experience and interaction.

Wong and Lai’s strategy involves thinking through intersubjectivity at the level of the sensorial boundary of individuality and asking where then to draw the smudged lines that suggest the ecotones of subjectivity. When a host of organisms and organic units, some of which constitute part of the human organism, are given “subject status” in the sentence, what might be read as “mere” poetic anthropomorphism becomes a syntactical manoeuvre that snarls and folds the limits of anthropos into an incogitable tangle that nonetheless aims toward a good:

condensation nuclei
 defy the odds
 and even the temper’s blows (95)

generations to instant message the future cell by cell
 microbe by mycelia, vertebra by xylem
 zygote by eukaryote, carapace
 by axial stalk
 critical mass
 amends (119)

Cells and nerves, viruses and pheromones, mycelia and mitochondria are all agents of the hope and defiance—the immunoresistance—of this poem. Healing potential lies in the possibility of spontaneous transmutations, meioses, and metamorphoses.

The human subject imagined in *sybil unrest*, inhabiting a fragmented set of socioeconomic and identity positions, is "radically multiple" and "deeply enigmatic even to herself. . . . A population inhabits [her] consciousness . . . composed of the 'folds' Deleuze describes in every body. . . . [I]nfinately porous, spongy or [having] a cavernous texture without emptiness," this subject still experiences singularity through her own "steady and indifferent pulse" (Craig 3). Philosopher Megan Craig, in her study of the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas and William James, turns to Deleuze to describe the psyche of the Levinasian ethical subject who "finds herself inherently plural and entangled in a multifaceted world" (3). While tracing Craig's full reading of Levinas' ethical subject and its parallels to Wong and Lai's subject is beyond the scope of this paper, I share Craig's sense that a Deleuzian model of porousness is useful for imagining the subject of *sybil unrest*, created wholly through its intersubjectivity. Like Juliana Spahr's "everyone with lungs," Wong and Lai's subject breathes in and breathes out, has pores, and is "under subjection to everything, as a supporting everything and supporting the whole" (Craig 15).

Of course, Deleuze is not describing a human subject, but rather "the pleats of matter" in *The Fold*. By affirming the cellular composition of the mark(et)ed anatomy that stands as their model of subjectivity, Wong and Lai affirm both the multiplicity and fluidity of the subject's sociopolitical identity and the subject's porousness *at the level of matter*, of the microbiota, of cell membrane and the boundary of organism/environment—that is, at a biopolitical level.

The "weft of soul's fabric / absorbs chemical affect" (96), they write. For Lai, the biopolitical is the set of economies existing at superscales and subscales to the level of consciousness that says "i," where "free flowing capital under a neoliberal agenda mobilizes populations and politics as statistical entities to be manipulated, bypassing the 'individual' of enlightenment humanism at both macro (population) and micro (medical and biological manipulations such as organ donation, genome mapping, genetic engineering) scales" (Lai, "Community" 116). In the biopolitical sphere, the time scales of political action shift from the scales of party or nationalist politics, as each moment of consumer decision-making opens onto the long tails (the micro long moments) of biochemical processes triggered in the body and the cumulative, discrete witness of invisible data aggregators.

This subject's intersubjectivity occurs not only between human bodies but also between forms and identities sharing the space of her own body, as "she" relates to "her" antibodies and antigens, "her" emotions and

thought processes, negotiating tensions of hunger and restraint, impulse and counterimpulse. “Her” proprioceptive agency, “her” ability to perceive and respond to “her” population of cells, takes place in an environment of competition to own control of her desires. “[T]he personal is maniacal wants breakfast at the pump” (110), if “she” allows her “self” to say yes to that manufactured desire. The personal is the process of negotiating permeable, multiple boundaries through which substances and ideas pass, are allowed to pass, and are obstructed from passing into and out of cell and feeling structures. The ethical personal is the sense of individuation this negotiation engenders in the cell and feeling structure called “human.”

In this model, *sybil unrest*’s dialogue/text, produced through digital and print media and vocal exchange, is a Spivakian ethical singularity and Deleuzian nomadic singularity, an overall back-and-forth movement of flows and free intensities between and through mark(et)ed bodies. “How the personal sparks dialogue” (127) is not simply a question of identity articulating its participation in a collective politics but the species-level, call-and-response dynamic of a singularity experiencing itself individuated over two points in (shared) space. Two sets of similar proprioceptive reactions to external events, the catalyst of shared response, and a choice made in “renga spirit” sets this flow in motion. The bounding off of what, at the level of cell and energy is like both birdsong and the spontaneous production of good weather, *sybil unrest*’s occurrence happens at the littoral zone of Wong and Lai’s interaction. The book is an ecotone of “them,” a mutual semination, a shared “infiltration as cells,” where:

cell culture’s defiant drag

modifies mitochondria

joy ride to synthetic natural

parachute catches air to hold human aloft (126)

NOTES

- 1 The writers’ framing of their “attempt” as merely a “reinjection” of racialized and gendered terms into the avant-garde critique of subjecthood under late capitalism risks limiting critical reception of *sybil unrest*. It is tempting to be guided by their framing, but Wong and Lai “reinject” nothing that ever was, in the first place, extricable from a frame of analysis unwilling to divorce the subject from its materiality.
- 2 Donna Haraway calls the Vitruvian Man the “Man of Perfect Proportions . . . a figure that has come to mean Renaissance humanism; to mean modernity; to mean the generative tie of art, science, technology, genius, progress and money. I cannot count the number of times

- [he has] appeared in the conference brochures for genomics meetings or advertisements for molecular biological instruments or lab reagents in the 1990s" (*Species* 7).
- 3 News of an outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory System (SARS) first hit Canada in early March 2003. For analyses of how the popular media's representation of the risk of pandemic and its geographic origins contributed to the racist backlash experienced by Chinese and other East- and Southeast-Asian communities, see articles by Leung; Ali; and Kinsella.
 - 4 For a helpful summary of the history of the avant-garde critique of voice, authorship, and the lyric "I," see Perloff's introduction to her now-famous consideration of differences in formal approach in anti-expressive poetics.
 - 5 *sybil unrest* is full of punning allusions such as those evidenced in this passage, which of course echo Meditation 17 of Donne's *Devotions on Emergent Occasions* and US national anthem "The Star Spangled Banner," the lyrics of which come from Frances Scott Key's "Defence of Fort McHenry" (1814). Wong and Lai treat textual and lyric phrases like "memes," that is, like cultural units that (according to Richard Dawkins) are biotransmitted between minds much like the manner in which genes or viruses pass between bodies. Echoes of the authors' exposure to mass culture permeate their dialogue, producing a playful, media-savvy tone and an eery dramatization of the subject's formation through language, whereby self-expression always includes elements of mimesis, and can verge on the uncritical reproduction of earlier media consumption. Tracking the sources and reading the play of the most productive allusions in *sybil unrest* would be great fun—but I leave that for another essay.
 - 6 Lai's recent preoccupations with the limits of the subject are signalled in her essay on Stephen Frears' *Dirty Pretty Things*, in which she summarizes Foucault's formulation of biopower as exerting one power over the body as a machine from which labour can be extorted and another power over the "species body" of the human by way of regulatory controls: "I want to show how the anatomical and the biological are intertwined and managed in ways that shatter the bounded agency we call 'individuality'" (69). Wong articulated her politics of interdependence in a recent issue of *Canadian Literature*, where she writes: "... my own survival is intimately connected to the survival of indigenous peoples and their cultures. Through dialogue and thoughtful action we may shift away from the colonial norms that have been violently imposed upon this land toward a sense of interrelation and interdependence, not only with humans but with the plants and animals and minerals to which we owe our lives. That is, 'cultural diversity' extends beyond the realm of the human into 'biodiversity' if we are careful listeners and learners" (115).
 - 7 See Hardt and Negri for a discussion of how communication organizes the movement of globalization and how "we must consider communication and the biopolitical context coextensive" (32-33).

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