Carl Watts

"a dungeon every night and every day": The Zany Neo-liberal Subject, Alcohol, and Poetic Agency in Catriona Wright's *Table Manners*

Cultural critics ranging from Shawn Micallef to Timothy Taylor to Byung-Chul Han have written of the progressively blurring lines between work time and leisure time and the way this process affects even the most quotidian of social practices.[1] This phenomenon has been regarded as a symptom of neo-liberalism, or what Sianne Ngai understands as the condition caused by the shift from state-organized to disorganized capitalism, or from Fordist standardization to post-Fordist small-batch production, and the performance or service-based tasks that go with it (201). Ngai argues that these shifts produce a state of frenzied activity associated with the aesthetic category of the zany. With the zany defining our daily work-play social activities, including the act of consuming, it makes sense that Micallef and Taylor, as well as many recent Canadian poetry collections, engage with the social rituals accompanying the consumption of food and drink.[2] One such collection, however, does particularly important work in unpacking these distinct trends and their relationship to one another: Catriona Wright's *Table Manners* (2017). A poetry debut that features a sensory overload of culinary descriptors and accompanying social practices, Wright's book is comprised of lyric poems that ring with repetitive formal techniques that reinforce the collection's consistent subject matter and the exhaustion of its speakers. "Garnish," the book's second poem, is representative, referring as it does to

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neighbours loaded

with gifts wrapped in cream paper and secured with curly
pastel ribbons, plump, gleaming bouquets accompanied

by heart-shaped cards, casseroles and warm oatmeal cookies
in vintage tins with daisy trims. (13)

I want to suggest that Wright's depictions of this culture of consumption explore the dissolution of boundaries between work and non-work as well as the effects of this process on the neo-liberal subject. I also want to make the case that Wright's engagement with these topics, in which formal limitations exist in tension with the book's culinary abundance and the frenetic activity of its zany subjects, is uniquely illustrative of both the totality of neo-liberal containment and the agency that might nevertheless inhere in representing this dynamic poetically.

To make this argument, I first unpack the neo-liberal fusion of social and work lives. Sianne Ngai's conception of zaniness, or the frenetic activity of the labouring neo-liberal subject who is forced to adapt to ever-changing tasks and demands (11), is especially useful here given this subject's internal contradictions. As I will outline shortly, Ngai's zany worker exists in the confused and frenzied moment before this system becomes normalized, with Wright's formally consistent lyric vignettes of such activity capturing this moment in a way that recalls what Han identifies as the spiritual deadness of the neo-liberal subject and the maintenance of this lifestyle by a regime of intoxicating substances (a type of containment that Taylor and Micallef too have remarked in the culinary world). Accordingly, Wright depicts an at once frantic, grotesque, and cartoonish state of unliving that can be made livable only with the use of intoxicants—specifically, alcohol. Her poems register and preserve the moment just before this manic activity becomes systematized as the normal mode of production; they do so by illustrating the tension between frenetic activity and dispirited drudgery, with their speakers' use of alcohol facilitating this regime.

The second aspect of my argument is that, in registering formally the desperate, often intoxicated activity of the zany neo-liberal subject, Wright's poems signal the possibility of reclaiming agency within this regime. They do so by reworking the example of 1980s author Daniel Jones, in whose poetry

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alcohol consumption unsustainably overlaps with traditionally defined work hours in a way that resembles the beset, zany working subject. An important difference is that alcohol consumption as it is depicted in *Table Manners*—countless of Wright's subjects are "silly drunk on sweet fermented plums" ("Origin Story" 35), "gulp Malbec and reminisce" ("Date Night #2" 39), or find themselves surrounded by "themed fun and spiked punch" ("Parties: A Selection" 41)—is not an aberration but something that sustains participation in a social world defined by the dissolution of boundaries between work and non-work. Wright's poems render as nearly commonplace the depictions of intoxication and the tedium of insignificant or repetitive tasks that in Jones' work appear so jarring; her repetitious, consciously traditionalist, almost automatized poetics thus foreclose the possibility of vocational fulfillment that is central to sociologist Richard Sennett's conception of the skill and human impulse called craftsmanship (a concept that is similar to Han's ideas about personal fulfillment resulting from the overcoming of negativity, as will be discussed). And yet, in demonstrating this multiform containment using a recognizably craft-conscious poetics, *Table Manners* paradoxically demonstrates a kind of poetic agency: that is to say, its poetic representation of neo-liberal containment's peculiar totality—and of the moment at which its effects had yet to be normalized—itself indicates the possibility of finding fulfilling work even amid the frivolous activities associated with a regime of relentless competitive consumption.

Wright's preoccupation with several aspects of the neo-liberal condition is evident from the book's opening poem. "Gastronaut" presents competitive consumption as an indication of work-life fusion. Its opening lines, "I would cut off my own thumb for the perfect thimbleful / of wood-ear mushroom and bamboo shoot soup" (11), invoke the bodily as well as Orientalist images of torture and hardship that connect sophisticated, ironized taste with an almost animalistic depiction of life in the rainforest. The exoticized excess of the dishes described ("singed pigs' feet, pearly cartilage and crisp skin") gives way to images of a dehumanized, unending exhaustion: evidence (shared via social media) of a rival's having consumed barbecued tarantulas drives the speaker to "days and days of foraging / for edible moss just to calm myself enough to sleep"; after eating a durian, "I didn't brush my teeth for a week"; later, the speaker is "rancid with resentment, // my body a kingdom of rot."

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The fusion of work and leisure culminates not only in sleeplessness but in non-life rendered in images of decaying flesh. In "How to Throw a Dinner Party, or, A Guide to Avant-Garde Table Manners," guests appear in a more realistically corporeal although equally grotesque rendering, being "cordially invited to sit at the dinner table / and shit. They eat escargot and éclairs in the water closet, / crouched by the emerald-encrusted bidet" (29).

The totalizing system is first rendered as interchangeable with more anodyne lifestyle interests and therefore a way of life that is manageable: the speaker of "Gastronaut" declares, "I just chose to care about this instead of something else" (11). When the possibility of life's end does come up, however, the cuisine departs from plausible exoticism and enters into the fantastic: "My death row meal is a no-brainer: slow-roasted unicorn haunch / and deep-fried fairy wings with chipotle mayo dipping sauce" (12). The received text "no-brainer" continues the conceit of the unliving working subject, subsequent phrases combining the animalistically corporeal (haunches, wings) with the unreality of the named fauna. The poem includes within itself the persistence of this regime beyond its speaker's death, the undead eater entering communion with an embodied, killed, cooked, and consumed fantasy feast. Divisions between leisure time and time devoted to the work of competitive consumption dissolve further, to the extent that life and death are combined into an endless present of culinary desire.

It is alcohol—absent from "Gastronaut"—that comes to animate and sustain Wright's speakers' unceasing participation in this universe of competitive consumption by rendering it comprehensible within quotidian patterns and habits as opposed to sequestering it in the fantastic. "Mukbang," which provides a fairly straightforward picture of alcohol dependence, employs the trope of the alcoholic husband "enjoying / the Tuesday night special: beer / after beer after whisky after beer" (18). But alcohol consumption for the sake of intoxication is restricted to three lines, separated from the content of a poem whose title, as per Wright's note, refers to "popular live-streaming webcasts in South Korea in which hosts enthusiastically consume enormous meals while the audience provides feedback via chat" (85). The extreme commitment to fashionable consumption—one of the hosts is a "size minus ten," but the speaker signs in "to see her eat garlic chicken / with such gusto it lifts loneliness off / your shoulders, loosens your anus" (18)—is intact but is here contained

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in the isolation of an exaggerated and exoticized Internet-era loneliness. The poem synthesizes the intoxication of the husband with the sensationalist extremes of "Mukbang," in the process establishing the collection's depiction of a ceaseless commitment to establishing one's curatorial brand.

And yet there's something notable about Wright's relentless treatment of these tightly linked issues. *Table Manners* has not received much critical attention beyond reviews, but, taken together, these reviews help shed light on the larger dynamic of hope and hopelessness at work in the book. Gillian Sze's piece in the *Montreal Review of Books*, for instance, states that Wright's poems reveal the way that food "defines culture, lifestyle, and class difference." Natalie Boldt's remark that Wright crosses the boundary "from appreciation to obsession, creativity to absurdity" (147), acknowledges that Wright's poetry is far from an earnest, unproblematized treatment of food culture and the habits surrounding it. Most saliently, Julie Mannell claims that *Table Manners* investigates "how the self reacts when constrained by the obligatory digestion of cultural signifiers and the sometimes unpalatable imperative to perform socially" (73). Mannell regards Wright's poems as using the body to register the totality of the neo-liberal condition, or a situation in which "the body is one with the world but the world makes the body sick" (75). This image of ostensible unity evokes the way in which Wright's poems register both the levelling of divisions between work, leisure, and sociality and the consuming individual's fraught experience of this moment.

This pervasiveness of the neo-liberal regime and the multiple ways in which our very bodies and sustenance are shaped by it has been remarked in the realm of food and drink by a variety of Canadian cultural critics, including Taylor and Micallef.[3] Both explore the way in which the ostensible novelty and abundance around which food culture revolves in fact produce forms of exhaustion. Taylor's *The Cranky Connoisseur* (2010) regards the foodie's quest to experience gustatory excellence as a manifestation of Jacques Lacan's and René Girard's ideas about our desires being influenced by what our peers desire. Taylor refers briefly to Lacan's general argument that desire is bound up with the desire of the Other, arguing that our desire for the food-fashionable is bound up with timeless experiences of rivalry (16).[4] Micallef's *The Trouble with Brunch: Work, Class and the Pursuit of Leisure* (2014) illustrates how Toronto's arts and culture workers are no strangers to

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this reality. Micallef's look at the collapsing distinctions between leisure time and time on the clock (9-10)—which unpacks brunch as a social phenomenon that masquerades as a leveller of hierarchies while in fact reinforcing class inequality and inhibiting solidarity among different categories of worker (51)—resonates with Wright's registering of a culture in which advocation of the curatorial self plays out in an environment of competitive consumption. Wright's poems hold these separate analyses together by presenting ironized versions of the constantly curating and consuming self that structures the work of North American poets born in the mid-1980s; in so doing, they also show us the effects of this regime on the consuming subject and offer an unexpected assertion of poetic agency.

Furthermore, the tonal uniformity that exists across the seventy-odd pages of poetry that make up *Table Manners* may register as cloying, or even jarring. The one criticism in Mannell's review of *Table Manners* is that, by confining itself to "the language of the culinarian in the world beyond the kitchen"—what Mannell calls both a metaphor and a constraint—Wright's book produces a repetitious element that makes readers feel "as if they are being hit over the head with the theme" (75).[5] There is certainly a lack of variation, not only in terms of content but also in the format of the poems. Almost all of those in the book's first two sections feature enjambed free verse that, despite its lineation, usually takes the shape of syntactically complete prosaic sentences.[6] With only a few exceptions ("Magpie," "Dumpster," "Instinct"), they are arranged in stanzas of two to four lines, while many in the book's third and final section feature longer stanzas of similar free verse.

Consistent as well are the book's references to alcoholic beverages, which function not as a minor addition to the poems' range of consumables but in fact as a central component of *Table Manners*' formal inscription of irony. It's no coincidence that alcohol consumption comes up in Micallef's look at brunch, such as when he looks at the strain that this dynamic puts on friendships and asks, "What happens if you owe somebody overdue work, but you're overworked and need to blow off some steam with friends, but the person you owe the work to is out with your friends?" (39). His answer—"That's when you drink alone at home"—draws a line between the predominantly social and the hours that are spent in front of a screen.

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Nevertheless, Micallef's example, with its secluded workstation setting, is modern rather than neo-liberal in that it maintains spatial and temporal boundaries between the workday and time off. Wright's poems never quite reproduce this distinction. Instead, a poem like "Job Satisfaction" begins, "Stylist to star fruit and frozen daiquiris, I understand the right lighting / can detonate salivary glands, expose latent cravings // for mama's ribs or depraved carb binges" (21). Even when a discrete workplace is depicted as outside the work of socializing and consuming, it is rendered as something apart from and yet expected to coexist with the work of one's self-advocacy as both consumer and tastemaker. "BBQ" makes this clear when it refers to a regular occupation as something that might either "suffocate or inspire" (31). All of which is to say that the poems register the dynamic of blurring social and professional interactions in the service of establishing one's curatorial profile, and presenting a flattened reality in which any residual compartmentalization of time is in the process of further dissolution.

Wright's depictions of alcohol, and the formal aspects of the poems that resonate with its effects, register the way in which the totality of work-life is overwhelmingly oppressive and yet also in a process of being normalized. According to Sianne Ngai, this tension exists in processes of neo-liberalization. Ngai's quintessential example of the zany subject—Lucille Ball's character in *I Love Lucy*—personifies this emergent world of post-industrial instability with her toggling between various occupations and roles. *I Love Lucy* establishes "an aesthetic of action pushed to strenuous and even precarious extremes" (185), its heroine's spectacle of zaniness arising from a comedic "dialectic between social inflexibility and flexibility" (179) that accompanies her vocational capers. As Ngai concludes, zaniness as mode of production and aesthetic contains within itself its zenith and inevitable disappearance. As zaniness transforms from comedic quirk into a "rapid succession of projects" that become "immediately dissolved into an undifferentiated stream of activity" (231), its novelty becomes codified as neo-liberal norm. Wright's poems operate in this moment of tension between the unusual and the routine, suspending the transformation from zany to just everyday life; her depictions of the automaton-like state created by alcohol abuse capture and perpetuate this moment.

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This alcoholic preservation of the moment at which the zany collapses in on itself is visible in Wright's well-crafted and yet repetitive, almost slavish formalism. The distinction between meaningful work and life and the automaton-like state of the zany neo-liberal labourer is discussed by Han, whose *Burnout Society* (2015) distinguishes the lives lived under neo-liberalism from those in which subjects have a greater degree of autonomy. Han describes the shift from an "immunological age" in which threats come from outside the self to the "massification of the positive" that defines the present (7). In this newly totalizing "achievement society," our ailments come not from disciplinary prohibitions and directives but from the "[u]nlimited *Can*" of "projects, initiatives, and motivation" (8-9). The response to this condition of unbroken work-life, Han continues, comes in the form of hyperactive productivity and a subsequent development of symptoms like those of "emaciated prisoners lacking all vigor who . . . have become entirely apathetic and can no longer even recognize physical cold or the orders given by guards" (19). Han's depiction of this aspect of the present resonates with the abundance of consumable goods in Wright's poems as well as the totality of the consumption regime she depicts. The exhaustion in Wright's poems is palpable: the more splendid the description of an exotic dish, the faster its distinction dissolves into the abundance of the book's endless buffet spread. What's more, as is suggested by lines from "Celebrity Chef"—"He is equally happy berating / philistines and plumping dumplings with grandmas" (62)—purported transcendence of the high culture/low culture divide is itself clichéd.

The insensate exhaustion brought on by these changing conditions of production is described by Han as creating a burned-out subject whose weakened capacity for negative feelings transforms thought into mere calculation. It is worth quoting Han at length here. Although what he describes is the computer, his language equally applies to the mind of this exhausted yet still efficient subject:

> calculates more quickly than the human brain and takes on inordinate quantities of data without difficulty because it is free of all Otherness. It is a machine of positivity [*Positivmaschine*]. Because of autistic self-referentiality, because negativity is absent, an idiot savant can perform what otherwise only a calculator can do. The general positivization of the world means that both human beings and society are transforming into *autistic performance-machines*. One might also say that overexcited [*überspannt*]

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> efforts to maximize performance are abolishing negativity because it slows down the process of acceleration. If man were a being of negativity [*Negativitätswesen*], the total positivization of the world would prove more than a little dangerous. According to Hegel, negativity is precisely what keeps existence [*Dasein*] alive. (23-24)

If we are willing to look past the ableism in Han's diction—"autistic" and "idiot" especially—we might find in his final term, "alive," something that resonates with the at once agitated and dully predictable actions of Wright's beset poetic subjects. "Alive" here suggests that agency in this formulation depends on the alternating negativity and positivity that inheres in a comprehensible work-life division—or, the conquering of negativity that manifests in creativity or innovation on top of artistic skill or craft. Both of these aspects of negativity are absent from *Table Manners*: its lyric subjects employ alcohol to sustain participation in a world of constant consumption-oriented work, thus depicting and participating in a cycle in which they lose the ability to overcome negativity in Han's sense—more practically, to assert individual agency by solving their problems or escaping the totality of a system of competitive consumption and curation.

It is precisely this loss of agency that the formal characteristics of Wright's poetry register. Her self-conscious traditionalism, which in its repetitious excess is severed from the self-improvement associated with the honing of poetic craft, shows us the distinction between a meaningful overcoming of negativity and the increasingly passive neo-liberal labourer who has internalized this toggling between disparate tasks as just the nature of work. The poems' well-wrought nature—the ease with which they return to chiming consonance and metrical repetitions, their "plumping dumplings with grandmas"—mark them as participating in a poetic economy that prizes craft. Craft has been unpacked in more general terms by Sennett, who regards craftsmanship as "an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake" (9). This concept exists not only in the world of skilled manual labour, but also among roles as diverse as computer programmer, doctor, and parent; of course, he regards it as central to the arts as well, with all these areas of endeavour allowing a practitioner to focus on "objective standards, on the thing in itself" (9) as they pursue quality, or excellence, or, indeed, some kind of transcendence of the drudgery of repetition or mere efficiency.

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It is in this latter respect that Sennett's ideas resonate with Wright's poetics. *Table Manners* consists of lyric poetry that is stylistically informed and conversant with the tropes of craft that sustain conventional notions of poetic practice. Wright's poetry, in other words, participates in the unrelenting requirements of maintaining its speakers' culinary-curatorial status. But its representation of alcohol consumption, specifically, contrasts the activities required to maintain one's curatorial brand with Sennett's valorization of the learning and autonomy resulting from more conventional notions of craft. It does so by depicting the consuming subject as numbed by intoxicants and defined entirely by the curatorial rituals of perpetual work-play. In the process, it has less in common with the well-known tropes of the Purdyesque poet-drinker than with the work of Daniel Jones, which combines frenetic, alcoholic activity with the world of on-the-clock labour and therefore itself anticipates Wright's beset, besotted, zany subjects.

The distinctness of the environment registered by Wright's poems is evident in "BBQ," which explicitly contrasts the brio of sociality-as-work with traditionally defined labour and in turn characterizes the latter as another object of assessment ("We debate day jobs, if they suffocate or inspire" [31]); the poem presents a still more encompassing regime of consumption than the spectacle depicted in "Mukbang." Its concentrated images depict alcohol not only as another consumable item for selection but also as a tool for sustaining the omnipresence of this regime. The opening line "The grapevine is strangling the basil" evokes not only gossip and botanical foodstuffs but also the vineyard; subsequent images ("the smell of lighter fluid" and "All the mint from the balcony bathtub has been juleped") include homegrown means of intoxication in this dynamic, expanding the undifferentiated work-play universe to include household culinary and horticultural practices as well. The imagery moves into stoner-party territory ("Dodging our voices, Frank Zappa cackles about rutabagas"), but the final couplet pulls back from this conceit. The catfish that "grows oily and succulent in its foil shroud, / cayenne-dusted whiskers igniting the air," is a cloistered, isolated entity—recall the popular online valence of "catfish," meaning one who presents oneself as something one is not—that marinates in the substances in question, the sensing apparatus of its whiskers contributing to the electric environment accompanied by Zappa. The

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barbecue's attendees have been conditioned—not only by the dispensations of taste and distinction, but also by literally botanical and biological renderings, including the omnipresent alcohol.

This poetics is different from that of many Canadian poets in whose writing alcohol is a recurring component. The most well-known figures in the earlier tradition—Al Purdy, Alden Nowlan, Milton Acorn, and Gwendolyn MacEwen—were regarded as bohemians whose poetic depictions of alcohol were couched in a lifestyle that has either moved beyond the traditionally defined world of work or else avoided the latter almost entirely. Purdy's "robust," typically Canadian, ostensibly working-class demeanour would become well known as that of the country's unofficial poet laureate (Silverberg 230),[7] his plain-spoken free verse documenting such a lifestyle fairly cleanly and helping form this cumulative lyric persona.[8] Nowlan's alcohol-heavy lifestyle was supported by less-than-onerous university positions,[9] a fact that characterizes him as an adjunct to Purdy. Acorn and MacEwen are located still further outside a recognizable world of work: Acorn is Purdy's more politically authentic counterpart;[10] MacEwen's work has generated an irregular body of scholarship that has at times folded alcoholism into the mystique of her persona.[11] The role of alcohol in the work of these poets is subsumed under a series of variations on the Purdyesque example of the poet as existing after or outside a recognizable work-life binary—including, in the case of MacEwen, the ostensible anomaly of the tragically unstable woman whose extreme sensitivity is nevertheless given relatively direct expression in her poetry. In all cases, their speakers or poetic subjects do not navigate the massification of positivity that defines the world of Wright's poems. Instead, the "work" of poetic production is in this earlier tradition associated with a comparatively straightforward lyric expression of the sort Wright's poems transcend.

There are important differences between Wright's poems and these lyric expressions of the alcohol-abusing poetic subject who has avoided or transcended the need to coordinate such behaviour with a recognizable work schedule (and whose selection of beverages is seldom subject to the scrutiny experienced by Wright's drinker-curators). Wright's vignettes register instead a neo-liberal reality of frenzied social labour that is itself maintained by regular abuse of alcohol; they also exist at a remove from the mimetic quality

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of free verse, registering in their formal features the rote, ultimately unfulfilling nature of this work. Her poems also resonate with the work of Jones—in terms of content, but also in that Wright's repetitive formalism is mirrored in Jones' poems by an excess of drinking imagery rendered as direct, unadorned reportage that resists the kind of sentiment or reflection that often adorns Purdyesque free-verse treatments of the bohemian poet lifestyle.

Jones, however, depicts in his poems an intense alcohol addiction that at times must coexist with the demands of the workplace. These situations anticipate the neo-liberal struggle of Wright's zany self-curators, even if they illustrate an earlier stage of the tension between modes of work that Wright depicts. Indeed, as Kevin Connolly's afterword to the second edition of *The Brave Never Write Poetry* (1985) suggests, Jones is an outlier when it comes to the above variations on the Canadian poet-drinker. What still stand out as "unusual" tales of "depression, drinking and doomed love" were dismissed by contemporary reviews as the stuff of a "tired drunken-poet 'persona'" (93). And yet, Connolly's reassessment of the book classifies this critical resentment as part of Canadian critics' aversion to confessional verse and resentment of its author's singularity—the "persona," in other words, was possessed of an unsustainable intensity of consumption and work that made for scarcely believable lyric tales by an inconvenient "*enfant terrible* from Hamilton writing about puke and semen and drunk tanks beating us all to the punch" (94). The sordid extremes of Jones' socially unacceptable tales diverge from the archetype of the post-work bohemian poet, registering a gruesome aesthetic of always-on that is at times similar to that of Wright's zany poem exploits, even if this plays out in an environment in which work appears more clearly divided from the purely social.

The aptly titled "Work" illustrates this resonance most vividly. While Jones wrote many poems about his regular drinking (which did not seem to be restricted to any particular time of day), as well as about the near impossibility of separating the latter from whatever time he managed to devote to remunerative tasks, "Work" illustrates a jarring combination of the two lifestyles that resembles the beset condition of the zany worker thrust into a succession of unfamiliar roles. The poem begins after the speaker, having "picked up a temporary job with the League / of Canadian Poets," has spent a night drinking:

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> The next morning I was sick &
> an hour late. My desk was covered with
> books that had to be bundled & mailed
> out. I smoked a couple of cigarettes
> & read some of the books. People were
> running around talking about arts grant
> deadlines & various problems with the
> photocopier. I lit another cigarette &
> started to bundle the books. After I'd
> made about three bundles I walked down
> to the post office. On the way I went
> into a tavern for a beer. It went down
> quickly & I had two more
> When I got back
> to the office, the phone was ringing. I
> picked it up: some poet from the U of M
> couldn't make a reading:
> "No problem," I
> said, "no one would have shown up anyway"[.] (26)

The speaker here, like many of those in Wright's poems, drinks as part of his work, even though such behaviour is both unsustainable and at the time existed well outside the behavioural norms structuring Wright's vignettes. And yet Jones' speaker is distinctly different from Wright's smooth hipsters in easy (if anxious) dinner party symbiosis. Near the poem's conclusion, "The other people in the office / were looking at me strangely" just before the speaker walks out of the office to head back to the tavern for more beer (27). He hangs on to a job in a work culture that has, to the astonishment of all concerned, granted him temporary access to one of its spaces. Whereas Jones' speakers are rebels, or at least misfits attempting to manage a working life in the context of addiction, Wright's poetic subjects play by the rules—the spaces of work, socializing, and intoxication are fused, with alcohol sustaining as well as contributing to the work of advancing one's curatorial profile. Indeed, the poem uses alcohol to maintain the tension between the waning eight-hours-on-the-clock model of labour and the shambolic bohemian lifestyle that exists outside or beyond that model. "Work" captures the dysfunction of the intoxicated office automaton, preserving the tension between workaday diligence and carefree bohemianism, just as Wright's poems, with their performance and prolongation of the zany mode of social

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labour via the use of intoxicants, reveal the ongoing normalization of this type of labour.

But Wright's work departs from Jones' more plainly signifying style, revealing in its formal characteristics the process of normalization contained within the zany. The poems' formal features demonstrate an ambivalence between the in-control, high-performing social subject and the unliving automaton. In an interview with Matthew Walsh, Wright states that the vocabulary in the poems is drawn from numerous sources:

> I was interested in exploring the language surrounding food culture, including restaurant reviews, menus, competitive cooking shows, dumpster diver message boards, diet tips in magazines, anthropological texts, opinion pieces about genetically modified food, etc. . . . I kept lists of new or interesting terms that I encountered and sometimes sonic riffs on those words—anagrams, rhymes, assonant words, etc. I drew from this lexicon while writing the book. (Wright, "Table Manners")

Wright describes a poetic method in which the author collects terminology, phrases, and images that will be manipulated so as to generate a series of related lyric voices. But this process of collection also speaks to the omnipresence of such ostensibly unique terms. The result is poetry that thrives in the interchangeability of consumable objects to the extent that it is almost proto-algorithmic; it registers the futility of searching for a "voice" amid information overload and the totality of our experience of consumption and curation, yet it remains within the realm of conventional (if formally astute) lyric poetry.

Still more crucial in establishing the omnipresence of this regime and the use of alcohol in enabling one's navigation of it is the collection's stylistic consistency. In addition to the previously mentioned uniformity in subject matter and the format of the poems, there is a limitation in the range of the formal devices Wright employs: despite her description in the interview with Walsh of what could be considered a reliance on found text, the poems of *Table Manners* could not be described as using any of the processual or algorithmic methods that characterize contemporary conceptual writing (or even a marked application of fragmentary syntax such as that characterizing previous iterations of avant-garde poetry, like Language writing). But the tightness of the collection, not to mention its appearance with Signal

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Editions, the Carmine Starnino-edited poetry imprint of Véhicule Press, associates Wright's poetics with those who have at times been described as neo-formalist poets—poets who, whatever the distinctions among their own poetic practices, return in their critical writing to slippery ideas of craft, or the idea that objectively existing (or at least agreed-upon) standards are shared among all those practitioners of the form called poetry.[12]

Viewed solely in terms of this formal adeptness, the consistency of the poems demonstrates a certain self-control—a calmness that may seem at odds with the category of the zany. Sennett's exploration of craft as the desire to do a job well regards this commitment to excellence as existing apart from—indeed, often as being impeded by—market-centric constraints such as profitability or efficiency (9). Key to Sennett's exploration of craftsmanship are "the intimate connection between hand and head," the "dialogue between concrete practices and thinking," and how "these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding" (9). The very process by which one hones one's techniques and evolves one's craft, in other words, is according to Sennett anything but unthinkingly mechanical. One imagines that poets concerned with incrementally building on tradition as opposed to conceiving of innovation as a radical break with tradition—a position explicitly taken by Starnino on several occasions—would find Sennett's ideas appealing.[13] Wright's form is thus, at least on the surface, an example of the affirmative rhythms of the labouring poetic craftsperson.

But, given that the poems formally reflect alcohol's role in sustaining obsession and enabling unending participation in the regime of competitive consumption, Wright's formal skill in fact undermines this affirmative notion of craft, using it to demonstrate not agency but the containment of such within the rote, zany tasks associated with neo-liberalism. Sennett claims that "motivation matters more than talent" and that the craftsman's "desire for quality poses a motivational danger: the obsession with getting things perfectly right may deform the work itself" (11). These claims are reflected in Wright's manifold presentation of an obsession with or overcommitment to the fashions of competitive consumption, an uncomfortably consistent treatment of the topic, and the book's neo-formalist tightness, all of which are held together by the alcohol that sustains and animates her zany automatons' actions and lyric utterances. While not exactly subverting a

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notion of craft like that held by Starnino, Wright nevertheless calls into question the earnestness of the craft practitioner by eliminating the problem-solving element of Sennett's equation. Despite the poems' formal dexterity, they exhibit a flatness born of their inability to advance beyond their topical and formal horizon. At the level of content, the poems' speakers are unable to escape the containment of competitive consumption and constant work. At the level of form, this containment is enacted by means of virtually unchanging neo-formalist techniques and a constrained image inventory. This consistency makes for precisely the rote mechanical craftsmanship that Starnino as much as Sennett rejects. *Table Manners*, in depicting the lyric subject labouring under the regime of taste-making-as-work, dramatizes precisely what Sennett diagnoses as the chief cause of a craftsman's failure: "our inability to organize obsession" (11).

Wright's elaborate, multivalent poetic engagement with these instances of containment does not offer any specific solution to the predicament of the zany neo-liberal subject or competitive consumer. Nevertheless, in using precisely the tools of the poetic craftsperson to illustrate the multiply-constituted containment of such a subject, *Table Manners* draws our attention both to the petty labours of neo-liberalism and, in its representation of the totality of this regime, to the possibility of finding fulfilling work even amid such frivolous and ultimately unfulfilling practices. The poems' resonance with Ngai's category of the zany continues in their depiction of an impossible, perpetual acceleration of culinary exoticism, as well as one's ability to command knowledge of such. The irreverence of their consonance and internal rhyme register the frenetic pace and sublimated desperation of this category of neo-liberal affect: selected almost at random, take, "Fallow Day," in which ironized productivity is rendered cartoonish by the exclamation and accompanying consonance of "curds squeaking like Bedlamite mice. 10 am and damn / I've racked up 70 percent of a damsel's / daily recommended sodium" (49). The poems unsettle with their formal consistency but also with their relentless pace. Opener "Gastronaut" takes only until its fifth line to move beyond images of exoticism straight into the speaker's aforementioned envy of a competing foodie, the quick narrative pace and signature internal rhymes—"When Cassie posted those pictures of barbecued tarantulas in Cambodia / I wept with jealousy and rage. It took days and days . . . just

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to calm myself enough to sleep" (11)—reminding us that we can alternately fall behind in this relentless pace of knowledge accumulation and self-improvement, or else become an automaton that never will.

The zaniness of Wright's subject matter and her poems' abundant, almost musical sonic resonances draw attention to the inevitable totality of competitive consumption, but also to the limitations inhering in the poems' formal traditionalism—limitations that foreclose the possibility of attaining the hand-head reunification that Sennett envisions in liberatory enactments of craft. But at the same time, the book's depictions of this very process—its deployment of content and formal features that are themselves examples of such unceasing activity—signal the possibility of a poetic agency in their very registering of the pervasive unfreedom of the neo-liberal moment.

"Celebrity Chef" is in many ways the collection's most complete encapsulation of this dynamic. Consisting of five stanzas of three lines and a final stand-alone line, it begins with a ritual of performed peril: "He moves through the world with the confidence / of a matador / who marinates his sword in barbecue sauce" (62). The second stanza, with the lines "In Finland, he eats reindeer steaks and cunt- / shaped pastries," has the titular character at once respectful of Indigenous foodways and traditions and indulgent in the misogynistic scripts of masculinity that sustain the figure of the adventurer. In the third, where he gifts a Sicilian chef "ten tar-filled cannoli lavish with icing sugar," he is depicted as at ease with both market and gift economies. Then, the penultimate of the five stanzas builds on the culinary cliché in which the worldly chef has no fear of boundaries between high and low culture: "Feijoada. Adobo. Offal links. Sardinas con arroz. Zoodles. / He is equally happy berating / philistines and plumping dumplings with grandmas." The trope of breaking down binaries between high and low is subsequently made banal, with the lines "He loves his cameraman like mint / loves lamb" acknowledging that this process is reflected in the omnipresent language of televised popular culture.

The syntax of the above stanza's first line reinforces this totality with the alternating *a* and *z* of "Adobo," "arroz," and "Zoodles." The poem's final lines—"He drinks / himself into a dungeon every night and every day // he eats his way out"—complete a pattern in which each stanza provides a new demonstration of transcending binaries in its creation of a wholeness,

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totality, or (to return to Han) massification of positivity. There's a frenzied activity in the poem's tireless shifting among locales, cultures, cuisines, and registers, such as when the second stanza moves at breakneck speed through almost free-associative connections. The lines "In Korea, / he stuffs cabbage into terracotta coffins, buries them" move from Korea and kimchi to terracotta, an archaeological image of Chineseness that, in being buried, might evoke the fermented eggs that are associated not with Korean but with Chinese cuisine. The speed is enhanced by the sense of acceleration coming from each triplet's progressively longer indents. And yet the impossibility of this perpetual acceleration of activity and experience is underscored by the familiarity of the figure of the celebrity chef and the poem's richly repetitive consonance; what emerges is not a permanent state of frenzy but what is instead coming to be accepted as a normal mode of curation and consumption, much as Ngai's zany includes within itself its completion and end. The settling into a more predictable day-night routine of alcohol abuse is the mediating factor that keeps the zany seeming zany even as the performance has ceased to be spectacle. The final, dangling line's pronoun-based polyptoton (he-himself-he-his) inscribes and parodies the lyric utterance of the supposedly individual subject whose ability to navigate the preceding stanzas' waves of abundance is sustained by the cyclical, quotidian push of the alcoholic subject. The enjambment is here resisted by additional blank space before "himself" and a blank line following "every day," the syntax of "a dungeon every night and every day" existing simultaneously with the sense of the longer sentence construction, the familiar ambiguity associated with the line break ensconced in a repertoire of conventional lyric that is at once studied and numbingly consistent.

It is this exaggeratedly formalist aspect of Wright's poems, combined with the consistency with which they address this culture of culinary competition, that reflects the unending containment of the neo-liberal experience. Yet Wright also raises the question of whether this kind of formally aware, craft-oriented poetics—even one that is self-consciously traditionalist—might be precisely what is needed to register the unfreedom of neo-liberalism and the historical moment at which it is most recognizable. The repetitious character of the book, with its voices negotiating their own limits while bumping up against them again and again, reproduces a middlebrow experience of the

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drudgery of being hip and overworked. *Table Manners* avoids the romanticizing, straightforwardly signifying free verse of Purdy; it further ironizes Jones' earnestness even as it extends his at once desperate and irreverent performance of work. The manic, embodied acts that make up the poems finally might bring to mind once again the corporeal aspect identified in Julie Mannell's review of the book. The paradox of Wright's flamboyantly constrained traditionalism functions ultimately as an assertion of self: a simplified singing that is at once a cry for help from the dungeon of neo-liberalism and a reminder that, at the very least, we have the poetic agency to explore and represent our zany, cloying performances in all their irony, complexity, and erstwhile strangeness.

NOTES

1 Micallef provides a popular take on the social practice of brunch; Taylor has written both fiction and non-fiction about the world of competitive consumption that defines the contemporary foodie; Han takes a Hegelian approach to late capitalism's effects on freedom and mental health.

2 Among similar titles published in 2020, see Simina Banu's *POP*, Curtis LeBlanc's *Birding in the Glass Age of Isolation*, and Shaun Robinson's *If You Discover a Fire*.

3 Another art-world diagnosis of this condition is David Balzer's description of the ascendancy of the curator. Balzer argues that "curationism," or "the acceleration of the curatorial impulse to become a dominant way of thinking and being," has since the mid-1990s created a scenario in which institutions rely on others to "cultivate and organize things in an expression-cum-assurance of value and an attempt to make affiliations with, and to court, various audiences and consumers" (8-9).

4 The phenomenon Taylor identifies stands apart from past literary-critical analyses of consumption in Canadian literature, many of which analyze specifically marked cuisines and culinary cultures. See, for instance, Enoch Padolsky's attention to "places where we meet others as tourists, allies, or foes, and where history, inter-group relations, psychology, domination, and national and global forces are at play" (20), as opposed to the individual, quotidian behaviours explored by Wright.

5 Adrian Ngai's review of the book connects its depictions of food and its rituals with "the fraught union between content and form," although he does not explore the idea at length.

6 Minor variations include italicized dialogue that sometimes departs from prose syntax ("Magpie"), lists of lettered or numbered points ("Bliss Point," "How to Throw a Dinner Party"), and white space that sometimes creates a syntactical pause or break within a line ("Parties: A Selection"), but that more often adds only regularized visual spacing.

7 This post-work expressivity is invoked in George Bowering's *Al Purdy* (1970): after referring to Purdy's infamous "home-made wild grape wine" as "a famous Canadian literary libation" (2), Bowering describes meetings characterized by "the drinking and spilling of wine" as much as "talk about the poetry scene," the confluence of vice and verse, "and lots of loud raillery" (3).

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8 David Solway, one of Purdy's most vociferous critics, has stated that Purdy's work is of value solely for its content, his delivery being "mere narrative or reportage" (88).
9 Biographer Patrick Toner has described Nowlan's "desultory attempts to lay off the sauce" as well as his frequent "boasting about his drinking prowess" (256-57).
10 Acorn's "behavioural instability," according to Shane Neilson, relegated him to the margins while Purdy "moved tirelessly from national gig to national gig" (131)—a difference more in socialization and success than in the way alcohol figures into their respective poetics and personae.
11 Brent Wood, for instance, argues that MacEwen's alcoholism was exacerbated by hypoglycemia, meaning that the intoxication she experienced would have been accompanied by "exaggerated sensations of mental confusion or intense awareness of one's own feelings" (50). Wood compares the "visionary" qualities of MacEwen with those of "mystics": "psychedelic experimentalists, vision seekers of North American First Peoples, and shamans from the polytheistic cultures around the world" (40). He thus makes MacEwen's alcohol abuse comprehensible by constructing an exoticized and feminized state of supernatural perceptivity.
12 Starnino led the charge in this direction, populating his anthology, *The New Canon* (2005), with poems that he claimed were the most "aurally ambitious, lexically alert, and formally intelligent" (16).
13 In *The New Canon*, Starnino rejects notions of an avant-garde break with tradition, stating instead that "[p]oetry is an incremental art: skills are added to the repertory slowly, and if useful, stay" (30). See also *A Lover's Quarrel*, pp. 94-95.

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