Identity is Cruel: Capital, Gimmick and Surveillance in the Australian Post-diasporic Short Story

Keyvan Allahyari and Tyne Sumner

I F WE WERE TO TAKE RECENT CONTROVERSIES IN THE AUSTRALIAN LITERARY SCENE AS AN indication of its current priorities, we would—at least on one pronounced level—encounter what can be generally called an ethics of inclusivity for diasporic writers. Regardless of the degrees of sophistication of these debates, their participants appeal to the primacy of diasporic identity—its sheer visibility—as a necessary part of the constitution and imaginary of contemporary literature vis-à-vis the nation's demographic composition. This call for equity of representation is frequently paired with an emphasis on the labour of diasporic writers in surmounting obstacles for publishing narratives about multicultural life, and the structural biases of literary institutions, cultural awards and (white) critics against diasporic writing. The shared assumption here is that there exists an overlap of inequalities between social and literary worlds. What often remains a moot question is the extent to which disseminating diasporic representation is aligned with models of consumption prediction that are predicated on a direct relationship between institutionally fashionable terms such as diversity and inclusion, and maximising business performance schemes. As Sara Ahmed has observed, diversity is associated with conditions of work which are already promoted by organisations. 'The story of diversity', she writes, 'thus becomes a story of diversity's inclusion into the terms of an institution' (9).

In this paper we identify this contradiction-in-terms as the tendency of the progressive reading public to be caught in a relation of *affective ambivalence* toward diasporic literature: an anticipation that the diasporic work reassert itself in an arrangement of displacement and deference in relation to the expectations of identity assumed by the white-settler reader. This cultural set-up foregrounds a productive dilemma, especially in the context of the rise of 'creative industries' globally, which tend to co-opt diasporic representation for business opportunities in the context of the commercialisation of the public sphere (Hartley 108). In other words, we may, after all, desire of the diasporic work the very thing that capitalism wants us to desire of it. The work of diasporic writers, as Sarah Brouillette writes, is often 'understood as the "outgrowth" of belonging to that integral unity, and, as the emanation of a particular culture, their work is presumed to capture its essence' (11). We respond here to two broad questions. First, what becomes of diasporic cultural labour in an economic system that seeks to morph everything into potential capital? Second, what happens in the coming-together of the desire to be seen *as diasporic* and the transgressive aspirations associated with multicultural writing as a discursive end beyond its immediate representational means?

We focus on three collections of short stories by Asian Australian writers, each published by relatively small literary publishers: Tom Cho's *Look Who's Morphing* (Giramondo, 2009), Julie Koh's *Portable Curiosities* (University of Queensland Press, 2016), and Elizabeth Tan's *Smart Ovens for Lonely People* (Brio Books, 2020). All three authors have worked in various manifestations of the collected short form in Australia and overseas; Koh's first collection, *Capital Misfits*, for instance, was promoted as a 'capsule', while Tan's first book, *Rubik* (2017), was advertised as a 'novel-in-stories'. Tan also co-edited *In This Desert, There Were Seeds* (2019), a collection of short stories by Australian and Singaporian writers released by the independent Singaporean publisher, Ethos Books. Michael Griffiths has cogently extended James Nagel's argument about short story cycles to the Australian diasporic short story scene, noting that they harbour a 'tension between formal autonomy and a text's position within a wider set—collection, cycle or otherwise—[that] renders the short story collection as a privileged space for the allegorisation of such tension between transnational connectivity and diasporic experience' ('Form, Frame and Allegory' 100). Griffiths' observations hold in relation to the three collections in our study, in which characters are caught in worlds that dictate rampant hyer-mobility and claustrophobic confinement in temporalities that stretch conventional time/space arrangements. All the while, they maintain strong resonances of Australia's major metropolitan centres in which the authors resided at the time of writing: Sydney (Koh), Melbourne (Cho), Perth (Tan). To this we add that, as a formal space, the short story collection as such has the capacity to evoke a sense of accelerative speed which attenuates the

distinction between working and non-working hours, as well as a spatial fluidity that evokes the ever-expanding, ever shrinking working space

We acknowledge the inadequacies of the term 'Asian Australian' along the lines that Patti Duncan has identified in her study of Asian American writing: 'Asian Australian' neglects the specificity of national and regional identity, and various conditions of migration (*Tell This Silence* 5). The lack of these nuances may also imply affinities with the orientalist discourse. With this in mind, we read these works in light of their shared penchant for formic ingenuity and their refusal to be pigeonholed in terms of racial identity. We are also inspired by an ambit of stylistic influences among these writers; Koh, for example, has recognised Tom Cho as one of her most important inspirations ('Satirists Rising'). Tan has talked about Cho and Koh as the two writers who showed 'you can write about anything you want' ('Let Me Be Brief'). This generative authorial network is facilitated by recent opportunities for the publication of emerging Asian Australian short fiction in literary magazines such as *Liminal*, *Peril*, *Voiceworks*, and *Mascara Literary Review*.

Writing short stories as unprofitable labour allows a formal space analogous to the strained interface of the cultural and the commercial imperatives of literary production. As a genre, short story collections occupy a unique position in the literary field for their association with the common marketing concern as a 'hard sell.' They are also often representative of the relationship between literary magazines and commercial publishing; often an author's trajectory towards a published collection of short stories can be traced across several online creative publication spaces. Emmett Stinson has recently argued for the relevance of Australian short story collections in studying the national literary field, for their commercially marginal value, and relatively high symbolic capital. For its generally low financial return, 'the short story may seem an unlikely barometer of cultural change, but its usefulness in measuring the relative importance of symbolic capital for Australian publishing stems precisely from the fact that short story collections are a comparatively uncertain commodity' (Stinson 49). Stinson concludes that short story collections can problematise the narrative of the 'decline' of literary paradigm, especially after the rise of single-authored short story collections in the 2010s and partly because of the commercial and critical success of diasporic short story collections such as Nam Le's *The Boat* and Maxine Beneba Clarke's *Foreign Soil*. In this formulation, short story collections are 'useful for indexing the relative importance of symbolic capital because they remain a marginal and generally unprofitable form, but one that has still not been wholly exiled from the commercial marketplace' (50).

In light of these reflections, we describe these works as 'post-diasporic' to draw attention to their equivocation about the ways that late capitalist modes of globalised labour, including literary production, are preoccupied with the

multicultural body for its potential to become a commoditised object. The three collections under consideration enable a reading of a sustained form of waned or vulgarised affect achieved in sabotaging the function for identity ascribed by the literary market. Their aesthetics—to use Lauren Berlant's theorisation—projects a wilful letting-go of the 'cruel optimism' for being included on equal terms in the literary and economic sectors. Berlant writes:

> Whatever the experience of optimism is in particular ... the affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. But, again, optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming. (*Cruel Optimism* 2)

Berlant fosters a lens for conceptualising the double-bind of fetishised inclusivity: the inextricability of its seductive exhilaration and its blatant recruitment of difference. Nevertheless, inclusivity remains one of the most integral promises of the multicultural project in liberal democracies. Independent of its structural challenges, inclusivity is registered on an affective gamut; one *feels* included (or not) for certain ways of being acknowledged—recognised, celebrated, dismissed—in a particular sphere of cultural life. Being included remains a fantasy, for at the moment of naming inclusion as an institutional agenda, its putative liberating possibility becomes defunct; you can never feel included, if you are constantly reminded of the terms and conditions of your inclusion. Meanwhile, hope continues to attract the aspiring individual to the deferred ideal of realising inclusion. In Berlant's terms, 'the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way' (2).

These collections exhibit literary acts that conspicuously give up on the idea that artistic representation can change or usurp the hegemonic dynamics that engenders fetishised inclusivity. In the remainder of this paper, we show that Cho, Koh, and Tan achieve this aesthetic resistance through their play on three interlocking qualities of late-capitalist labour, each of which has implications for literary production: fandom, gimmick, and surveillance. They call the bluff of the literary scene, as unavoidably operating *inside* of the capitalist system, to be

inclusive without perpetuating its orientalist tendencies. Instead of elevating diasporic representation, these collections queer—slash, cheapen, weird—it to the point that it can no longer be recycled into the representational economy as a coherent, identifiable entity. In this sense, giving up the cruel-optimistic attachment to the fantasy of being included becomes a radical artistic counter-act.

Fanfiction as Refusal

Tom Cho's *Look Who's Morphing* plays on the idea of the authorial body through a first-person narrator and a series of migrant characters with composite subjectivities fashioned after various pop-culture figures. The centrality of the gender-fluid 'I' is overlaid by the collection's gawdy cover portrait by the artist Owen Leong; here, Cho peers into the camera with a bright pink bleeding cut on his face, while donning the famous upturned collar of James-Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and an Elvis pompadour. Set against a green screen, the image suggests imminent bodily transformation and the pervasiveness of Marvel Studio-style image production. Cho's bodaciously photoshopped portrait draws the readers' attention from the shifting primacy of codex, the written word, to icon, the writer's image. It also recalls the lurid cover images of fantasy novels and vanity magazines, which hint at the consciousness of their genesis and circulation within the discursive body of erotic literature. Paratextually, this direct eye contact with the reader intimates Cho's unapologetic staring-down of transphobic sentiments. The narrator (hereafter referred to with the pronoun 'they') prefaces their mutations with quasi-essayistic expositions about the mindlessness of lowbrow consumption. Discussing 'Dirty Dancing,' the opening story in his collection, first published in *HEAT* in 2004, Cho has raised the integral role of persistent 'self-insertion' in his work as a fan of pop culture products (the 1987 film *Dirty Dancing*) to 'slash' the dominant representation, a queering strategy to evoke 'discrepancies between its textual content and my own experiences and desires'. He writes: '[m]y self-insertion into this text is thus an ironic contrast to my inability to see other aspects of myself—including my Asian-Australianness—reflected in this film ('No One' 106).

What, then, happens to the diasporic identity in this act of inverted adaptation? How is it morphed? And into what? David Marshall writes about 'celebrity function'—cognate with Foucault's 'author function'—as the means 'to organize the legitimate and illegitimate domains of the personal and individual within the social. This power becomes activated through "cultural investment" in the play of connotation in the sign structure of the celebrity' (57). The figure of the celebrity is thereby of secondary importance to the denotative possibilities in a semiotic system that gives meaning to fame, with the potential that anyone who can self-style with a particular configuration can pass as the next celebrity. It is for this reason that the language of celebrity and fandom intensifies and flattens

distinction at the same time on both ends; not only that there is nothing original in being a celebrity, there is also nothing original in being a fan either. Fanfiction starts from a similar originary position. Never the discourse of a single author, fanfiction develops out of a community for a collective of followers. Cornel Sandvoss writes:

> Fan objects thus form a field of gravity, which may or may not have an *ur*text in its epicenter, but which in any case corresponds with the fundamental meaning structure through which all these texts are read. The fan text is thus constituted through a multiplicity of textual elements; it is by definition intertextual and formed between and across texts as defined at the point of production. ('The Death of the Reader' 65)

The carnivalesque indeterminacy of fanfiction unfetters the diasporic writer from easy interpretations of their work that contain direct references to their background. A subsequent possibility is the space that fanfiction opens up for making a statement about disavowing facile aesthetic hierarchies and generic bounds, thereby undermining the cultural hegemony of Western literature that underpins these definitive constructs. Fanfiction, in the manner that Cho appropriates it, has the potential to become an oxymoron of high-concept kitsch by allowing a space for merging the highbrow and the lowbrow of the political and the popular. In 'Suitmation' the narrator reflects on the social phenomenon of wearing celebrity costumes as a 'special effects technique that involves the use of an actor in a costumed suit' (*Morphing* 11). Over time, the trend grows into a fashion movement with various members of the narrator's family having their own outfit, but they remain ambivalent about the mass proliferation of this artistic status: '[a]s much as I like suitmation, I have come to realise that I have mixed feelings about its popularity. These days, everyone wears suits: everyone is a celebrity' (*Morphing* 13).

With biting farce, *Look Who's Morphing* pitches the utilitarian rhetoric of grant applications against the faux-authentic, moralistic discourse that accompanies it. Playing on obvious intertextual links with William Friedkin's 1973 supernatural horror classic, *The Exorcist*, the narrator in 'The Exorcist' presents themselves and their 'Auntie Wei'—who thinks of herself as 'just like Melanie Griffith's character in the film *Working Girl*—as characters in a film that the reader is invited to imagine watching. After a night out drinking, Auntie Wei buys an apron with fake plastic breasts 'of caucasian skin tone', which makes her act increasingly erratically, including using the 'royal we', repeating 'we hate you' and speaking in different voices, including the 'confident and business-like voice' of the narrator's previous arts funding applications: '[m]y work on this collection demonstrates that I am capable of: 1) producing a body of short works that are thematically

linked, and 2) working productively with the assistance of arts funding support'. (18)

Outlandishly regurgitating the contrived expressions of grant applications, Auntie Wei burlesques the narrator's laboured craft of institutional language, leading them to wonder: 'demonic possession aside—my auntie may have the capacity to understand me far better than I ever thought' (20). This reversed mimicry is turned on its back when Auntie Wei mentions the Australia Arts Council, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact that Cho's collection was assisted by the funding body:

> As indicated by the project timeline (see *Timing* section below), by the time the proposed funded period would commence, work on the project will be more advanced and I would then be in a position to more significantly benefit from Australia Council funding. (20)

Auntie Wei's cut-and-paste facsimile grant application—as she is violently vomiting and cursing like the character Regan MacNeil in *The Exorcist*—stages complex meta-theatrical questions of authenticity and identity at the intersection of generations and between disaporic and non-diasporic subscribers to such language. The question becomes: at what stage does identity become a clerically imitative exercise? What is the relationship between this flippant imitability and the tiresome stiffness of arts applications? Cho pushes back against the convenience of reading his work for the obvious anxiety around cultural hybridity. Instead, identity is morphed, caricatured and, eventually, disconcertingly dissolved back into surrealist rupture from which it emerged. 'It turns out that Auntie Wei has no memory of what has happened', the narrator reveals as an ambulance arrives and the scene draws to the close (21).

Tan's stories tread a similar path to Cho's oxymoronic approach to racialised difference and the authorial politics of migrant literature by juxtaposing the frenzied commercialisation of the contemporary literary scene with characters who display an unsettling nonchalance towards the market impulse. In 'Disobeying', Harper Wen-Fox, an Asian Australian writer with two books to her name, attends a writer's festival to promote her new novel, *A Balanced Ensemble*. Stumbling through the session's formalities, the moderator (who we are told 'had perhaps committed to chairing more sessions than she could effectively rehearse for') positions Harper as a solvent to the festival's substandard coordination of facilitators: 'Now the world of *A Balanced Ensemble* is loosely based on the, oh I'm sorry I'm going to mangle this, the Quing? Dynasty? And it centers on a group of assassins disguised as performers in a *xiqu* company, did I say that right? Xiqu?' (*Smart Ovens* 157-58). As the moderator crudely dramatises her inability to pronounce non-Anglo diction, Harper is both irritated yet also numbingly

detached from the spectacle, responding, 'Just make an attempt and move on'. 'Harper doesn't wish the moderator ill', Tan narrates, it's not like she 'could have done any better with the slack elastic of her thoroughly Australianised tongue' (*Smart Ovens* 158).

Harper resents less the dull performativity of this culturally-inflected commercial spectacle, and more her role as a salesperson of an unsellable work of fiction, while her memoir, written several years back, still fares well. We are told that if she wished for anything, 'it's that she had a publicist who could tell her that she doesn't have to sit at this signing table any longer'; likely because she's signed two copies of *A Balanced Ensemble* but five copies of a book she'd written eight years earlier (158). The awkward enthusiasm of the moderator, who is 'so young, after all ... and so very white', stands in comical contrast to Harper's indifference, an attitude which resists an animated response to the racialised difference strategically set up by the festival. While her actions do not directly undermine the commercialised purposes of the festival, the internal dialogue implies a sabotaging of writerly identity.

This story's social satire is as much about the organisational and commercial antics of the literary scene (the envied spectacle of a long line of people waiting in front of a particular author) as it is a critique of the anxiety around the assessment of diasporic literatures. 'Disobeying' draws attention to the act of selling-out as neither a commercial nor artistic endeavour but rather a deeply personal maneuver on the part of the story's protagonist. In relation to the ways that literary festivals play on (and into) the commodification of individual experience, Millicent Webber has observed how 'cultural and social capital circulate within festival spaces' insofar as 'they are accumulated and mobilised by audiences, participants, and other commentators' (12). Within this paradigm, literary public culture functions as 'a particular embodiment of the dialogue between the intimate and the other, which permeates the contemporary search for identity and the self' (Webber 27). The writers festival, as a now necessary part of literary production, becomes a device to call into question the affectations of the contemporary literary scene: the politics of false praise, the intolerance of negative critique, and the fetishisation of productivity. The implication of Tan's fictional world is also that of the 'inextricability of capital from the production of the written word', a hybrid work-world Declan Fry refers to as the 'surplus value' of literary production for larger industries'. Within this system, Fry observes, 'the writer creates capital for others, but the capitalist process writes itself white. Its invisible sentence ought to be recognized, particularly when there is so much attention devoted to the relatively glamorous aspects of literary production: the book tours, the marketing write-ups, the academic conferences'. This economic apparatus also operates by marginalising the racialised body of non-white writers, cleverly folding difference into its refabricated marketing dynamics while

simultaneously, as Tan's story alerts us, employing 'the common defusing effect of "managing diversity" in public spheres' (Khoo 240).

Identity's Gimmick: Identity as Gimmick

Julie Koh's short story 'The Three-Dimensional Yellow Man' opens with a yellow actor leaping out of a screen into the audience at a theatre on an unidentified island. Upon appearing in the real world, he grows into a fully-fledged three-dimensional body. This prompts his attempts to distance himself from his days as a token one-dimensional ninja character by assimilating into the islanders' ways; he decides to pursue the life of the mind and exercise his luck at writing about Italian neorealist films. In his first writers' festival experience, he is placed on a panel with other yellow writers who have written about a variety of non-yellow topics, only to find to his irritation that the interviewer is fixated on discovering what it feels like to be in his skin:

> *What is it like to be yellow*? asked the interviewer of the yellow man.
> *That's not the only thing I'm interested in talking about, he replied. After all, the book I've written is about Federico Fellini and how women are represented in his films.*
>
> *I see, said the interviewer. But how has your yellowness impacted on your work? For instance, have you ever thought of a Yellow Man Group, similar to America's iconic Blue Man Group?*
> *…*
>
> *Being yellow yourself*, continued the interviewer, *why are you not writing about being yellow*? (*Portable Curiosities* 99)

Refusing to pander to the festival goers' voyeuristic appetite for exotic identity, the actor debases his yellow identity to its on-brand equivalents in advertising, describing it as '*like being the colour of a dishwashing detergent labelled with a picture of the morning sun through the kitchen window and alighting on a gleaming, freshly washed wine glass*' (*Portable Curiosities* 100).

Following the exchange, a naked one-dimensional yellow woman steps out of the same movie screen and morphs into human flesh. In her acting career, she was cast as an 'unhinged, manipulative, gold-digging girlfriend of a white social-networking entrepreneur … invented by the screenwriters to serve as a plot device' (*Portable Curiosities* 101). More stock yellow reality TV actors from border protection shows jump out of TV screens. As they crowd shopping malls, HR departments seize the opportunity to implement their new Diversity and Inclusion policies, sporting portraits of photogenic yellow people on their

corporate brochures. Fears of cultural swamp grow; one 'tight-lipped, flamed-haired woman' scurries out of a fish-and-chip shop to yell out her agitation about the unwelcome surge. She becomes an instant TV sensation, popular among the viewers for her tangos with other celebrities, including the 'chief of the island, a little frog-mouthed man, with thick eyebrows' (104).

Koh's commentary on the dilemma of the Asian Australian writer is deliberately campish and unsubtle. The story's tension remains on the most exterior level—that of the skin—to mark down the persistence with which the optics of 'difference' is impressed into the ethos of 'ethnic' representation in the literary marketplace as a way of predicting the readers' consumption habits. 'Yellow' becomes a moniker for the literal reification of the tabloid properties that these artists are conceived to exhibit. At the same time, cartoonish sketches of Pauline Hanson and John Howard point to the interface of phantasmagorical forces of pop culture with xenophobic populism embedded in neoliberal politics—the haunting 'fantasy of a late return to the flag', as Stuart Hall noted ('The Neoliberal Revolution' 326). This allegory of the reception of Asian Australian writers satirises both the medium and the end of 'diversity' initiatives in creative industry discourses and its emphasis on the authenticity of the individual 'ethnic' experience as part of a communal entity. By magnifying the connections between her story and the relational dynamic that manufactures and distributes race in the literary field, Koh preempts the reader's temptation to look for subversive signifiers that a work by an Asian Australian writer might otherwise be deemed to carry. We laugh partly because of the sudden relief of such interpretive labour. Our amusement is derived, not so much from the unravelling of racial bigotry, but from the realisation that we the 'symptomatic' readers, like the writers' festival attendees, are out of the job of redressing a form of social inequality or improving ourselves as moral readers. Dropping the desire to be agential thus allows Koh to point to the progressive-normative logic that glorifies the mere presence of minoritised identity in the commercial sphere as a sign that we are moving towards a more inclusive society, without considering the tendencies of the market to turn the 'multicultural' body into consumable data. The sheer ubiquitousness of this marketing ploy disaffects the yellow artists; the story ends with the yellow man dying in the street as the result of a hate crime, and the yellow woman distressingly wailing by his side.

In *Theory of the Gimmick*, Sianne Ngai identifies 'gimmick' as the 'compromised aesthetic' form of late capitalism; it is an 'overperforming and underperforming' mode best characterised by an ambivalent relationality to capitalist consumption and temporality as both something that we can do without, and something that has become oddly crucial to maintaining normalcy in our lives. The gimmick highlights the association of art and its use-value in the market, as a simultaneous 'form of labor-saving' and unproductive work. '[T]he gimmick', Ngai writes, 'is

arguably a miniature model of capital itself' (6). Koh plays up the gimmickiness of identity schemes to underline its brazen relations to contemporary work reproduction at large. In 'The Three-Dimensional Yellow Man', she renders the labour of the Asian Australian writer dispensable in a cultural economy keen to turn their art into commodity fetish. It is as if to say that we *need* diasporic representation as something of value for its potential to alter the material world, and yet these representations are superseded by the two-dimensional stereotypes transmitted freely in the cultural/industrial work systems. As Lachlan Brown writes: 'the scornful stance toward diasporic or 'ethnic' writing … raises certain questions about the collateral damage that one might cause when the play of diasporic authenticity meets specific locations' (3).

The question of the artistic body as the working body—and its typology along racial and gendered spectrums—remains a steady theme throughout Koh's collection. The alleged synonymity of the author's ethnicity with their praxis reiterates the neoliberal predisposition to hyper-utilise individual identity, whereby the body of writers from migrant backgrounds can only be type-cast towards homogeneous expectations of consumer society. The speaker in the collection's last story is an emerging Asian Australian writer named Julie, who after reading an article regarding the trendiness of non-fictional works about one's own 'real' experiences, decides to write an autofictional essay, entitled 'The Fat Girl in History'.

Koh's title recalls Peter Carey's award-winning 1974 collection, *The Fat Man in History*, as a play on the idea of authorial influence. Both collections warn against the human cost of the totality of capital, and the despairing impossibility of altering global work conditions. One day she visits a nude beach in Sydney, where in an unsolicited conversation with a stranger, she finds herself explaining how the reception of her work might suffer from prejudice towards her race and gender.

> I tell him I write fiction but am having a crisis of confidence. A review of my work has just been published in *The Australian Morning Age*.
>
> 'The reviewer said my fiction is bland,' I tell him. 'I think it's a typo. I think he meant to type "wild"'.
>
> I tell the Paunch that I wonder if my yellow skin and vagina are limiting my chances at being the next big Australian author. I tell him that I stand in the shower sometimes to try to scrub the yellow off but, huh, it doesn't work like fake tan. (215)

Later in the story, in a snippet that reads like an affectionate hark-back to Cho, Julie finds herself in another conversation with Judy Garland, the famous American singer and actor. Julie explains why her work may not be popular:

> 'I think I am behind the times. Everyone's writing about celebrities now. Like, inserting famous people into their fiction'.

> 'Interesting device', says Judy. 'A bit gimmicky'. (216)

Koh drives home the idea that to put identity to use under late capitalism, the writer would have to succumb to its constitutive gambit. The effect here is to produce an aesthetics that indulges in the absence of irony. While irony is associated with subtlety, and hidden layers of meaning, Koh's stories hand over their cultural message to the point of thwarting any rigorous interpretation. She upends the prescriptive creative model of 'show-don't-tell' to suggest the self-evidence of the reader's attempt to mine something of essence about Asian Australian identity.

Experience as Commodity

A central concern of recent scholarship on late capitalism is the increasingly porous boundary between work and leisure in contemporary datafied societies. The neoliberal commodification, privatisation and datafication of (almost) everything has produced a surveillance-industrial complex in which commerce, 'the life-blood of the free enterprise capitalist state', works to shape and develop surveillance technologies 'to control its own designated "other", its labour force' (Ball and Snider 4). In this regime, dataveillance, made possible through the dual digitisation and commodification of cyberspace, is the dominant paradigm of governance and of the commercial market. Alongside the inevitable transformation of the Web into an almost entirely market-driven domain, the datafied surveilled body is increasingly pertinent to critiques of late capitalist modes of globalised labour, where it seeks to bind labour, leisure, and the body ever closer together; a push towards 'self-objectification' that requires us to first present 'ourselves as data objects for inspection' and then 'experience ourselves as the "it" that others see' (Zuboff 464).

Social media, as the inevitable and now ubiquitous outcome of the merging of communication technology, capital, and social interaction, is the apotheosis of self-objectification in which personal experiences are now bought and sold as commodities. In this online marketplace, self-commodification is routinised, interactions are datafied and 'the producer becomes a digital "object" of continual production' (Faucher 16). Contemporary artists and writers are especially attuned to the user-as-commodity dynamic of late capitalism, not just because of the

aggressively commercial nature of creative industries, but also because of art's capacity to assess the conditions (and consequences) of its own production. This level of self-reflexivity in contemporary art is the outcome of a system in which, to use Marx's terms, 'labour produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity—and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally' (69). The way out of this epistemic knot for some contemporary artists and writers has been to go fully in—to enact, what the American artist Jennifer Lyn Morone calls 'extreme capitalism'. In a recent online exhibition, she took the elusive end goal of self-commodification to its extreme by turning herself into an incorporated person, an artwork that conflates her life and her business in order to position the audience to question why we so willingly hand our personal data to large technology companies for free. Advancing into 'the inevitable next stage of Capitalism', Morone's performance model 'allows you to turn your health, genetics, personality, capabilities, experience, potential, virtues and vices into profit'. 'In this system', Morone affirms, 'You are the founder, CEO, shareholder and product using your own resources' (Dullaart et al.).

Koh develops a critique of experience-as-commodity and the financialisation of creative work as dark and disconcerting as that in Monroe's experimental performance art by making use of the short story's capacity for self-contained speculative worlds that verge on, by turns, horror, surrealism and comedy. In 'Cream Reaper', the boundaries between labour, capital, exploitation and success become disturbingly blurred as an enigmatic entrepreneur—'a self-described food futurist'—comes to terms with the destructive consequences of unrestrained commercial ambition (69). Part critique of the dark consequences of unrestrained entrepreneurialism, part tragi-comedy about the performative nature of celebrity chefs and the 'foodie movement', it reads like a hypnotic catalogue of the contours of contemporary 'influencer culture' where image and performance replace all meaning.

'Cream Reaper' opens with a narrator having been 'just five minutes in the presence of the man known as Bartholomew G', a 'suave thirty-four-year-old' who 'has Sydney in the grip of a deluxe ice-cream pandemic' (69). The conspicuous gap between performance and reality becomes apparent when, receiving a single comment on his attire, G theatrically catalogues his outfit for the day: 'a dark green Acne studios fine-knit merino wool sweater over a white A.P.C. shirt, ASOS slim dusty-pink chinos rolled at the ankle, and a pair of Tod's tan suede moccasins. He's rocking Cutler and Gross tortoiseshell glasses and a pompadour cut so sleek he reckons it gives David Beckham a run for his money' (70). These lines are suggestive of Koh's self-consciously sardonic approach to the ways that contemporary late-capitalism performs, as much as informs, consumerism; especially in the post-digital milieu. G's curation of a style that appears (at least on the surface) effortless yet is meticulously constructed adheres to the inherent

performance-driven conditions of late-capitalism in which even 'ordinariness' itself can be commodified towards a particular aesthetic agenda: 'It's all about mixing high and low end brands' (*Portable Curiosities* 70).

Like most aesthetic categories of late capitalism, G's carefully manufactured fashion choices are also paradoxically encoded insofar as the visual trick they aim to deploy becomes their organising principle and therefore highly unsubtle, verging on gimmick. Sianne Ngai refers to this as the gimmick's 'compromised aesthetic' in which, '[l]ike capitalism itself, in which paradoxes like planned obsolescence and routinized innovation abound, the gimmick is a temporally sensitive and fundamentally unstable form' (6). 'One of the gimmick's paradigmatic instances,' Ngai writes, 'is the overrated product one would be a sucker to buy, and thus an unsold commodity whose value cannot be realized … from the stainless steel banana slicer to the cryptocurrency derivative, our very concept of the gimmick implies awareness that, in capitalism, misprized things are bought and sold continuously' (2).

Koh's story takes the concept of 'misprized things' to its horrifying extreme as G gives a detailed tour of his house, a converted warehouse that he told his architect to design to literally look like 'the Sydney housing bubble' (72). Walking through to the bedroom reveals a 'custom calf-leather bed shaped like a waxed vagina' (72). 'I adore this piece,' G says, 'because it goes right to the heart of the question: "Can art be commercial?" You have to sleep right in the centre of it, though, to be comfortable. Or you'll roll over the edges' (72). Here, Koh develops an astute commentary on the unrestrained accumulative strategy of neoliberalism by exaggerating G's inability to understand function over form. Although seemingly in control of his career choices, Koh's ice-cream entrepreneur epitomises total entrapment at the hands of marketing; he is incapable of distinguishing between the necessary objectives of working to make a living and performing an extravagant lifestyle of yuppie accumulation.

While on the one hand an obvious illustration of Koh's self-consciously kitsch comedic prose, G's obsession with accumulation also reveals the dark underside of the capitalist venture, one in which as Merve Emre writes, 'behind the mirror lurks something monstrous—an idea of art as device, an object whose representational powers can distort and devalue just as easily as they can estrange and enchant' (63). In this way, G's ice-cream business is always secondary to the commercial excess of clothing, art, housing, objects and public events needed to keep it alive. Professing his tactical obsession he divulges: 'It's all good to be making beautiful ice-creams … but I need to be thinking strategically. The thing is, you always have to think about what you need to do to stay ahead of the competition' (77). The figure of the aspiring—yet glaringly self-destructive—millennial is one of Koh's instruments to accentuate our degrading datafied reality

in which every human behavioural act is up for sale. This trend, described by Zuboff as 'behavioural surplus' to denote the predictive markets that 'trade in human futures' in contemporary datafied societies, reproduces experience as a commodity, ironically, at the cost of identity and experience as individuated entities themselves. Surveillance capitalism also strives towards total control of the human body in which 'personal data, like human tissue, blood or cells, have become commercial commodities, attracting a form of biovalue that can be exploited for profit by a diverse range of actors' (Lupton 14). Koh renders these socio-economic conditions of late capitalism over the top, and sardonically comical. This abuse of the body is endorsed by the extent to which the fluidity that the short story collection affords in developing characters who occupy dystopian work-worlds uncannily reminiscent of contemporary workplaces on the interface of the real and virtual workplaces. As we have noted, short story collections have the capacity to evoke a sense of disorder and speed, a feeling that something is always on the cusp of spiralling out of control. To keep afloat, therefore, you need to beat the system to its own game. Exemplifying this accelerative excess of late capitalism, G later professes: 'If a competitor does a deconstructed eggs Benedict, you do a *reconstructed* deconstructed eggs Benedict' (77-8).

Bodily Surveillance and the Gaze

Of the sociocultural anxieties brought about through the advent of the so-called big data, Kate Crawford has written that being able to 'blend in' or 'pass' is a very exclusive form of privilege. Indeed, the power to 'look' like nobody else (to not be 'on display') is not available to those who have been categorised with the hyper-visible marker of 'other'. Similarly, Cheney-Lippold argues that 'What is "seen" and "not seen" is more than a technological phenomenon or limitation but an algorithmic consequence shaped by history: who is empowered to look, what is made visible, and what is made invisible?' (14). Cho, Kho and Tan's collections are highly attentive to these embedded (and embodied) surveillant power dynamics; they critique them, resist them, undermine them but also self-consciously and ironically utilise them for aesthetic and commercial gain.

In Tan's *Smart Ovens for Lonely People* characters navigate environments pervaded by the experience of observing and being observed, from perspectives that move between public and private, oppressed and oppressor, and informed and unaware. They are also caught between being implicated paradoxically in the intensifying flow of capital in the neoliberal market economy and engaging in overt acts of resistance. In 'Our Sleeping Lungs Opened to the Cold', Tan develops a collective first-person narration of eight anthropomorphic creatures, part fish, part human; mermaids perhaps. They're encased in a tank at an unnamed restaurant itself *inside* a casino complex where the opening hours stretch into the early morning. The creatures are hyper-attentive to the spectacle of their

appearance: 'created for adoration, indexed behind glass' (3). The restaurant has no outward-facing windows, but the narrators reveal that they are (at first) soothed by the weekly after-hours visits of the enigmatic aquarist who emerges with a mysterious wooden box. 'When the restaurant was open', they narrate, 'we swirled behind the glass walls, floating spectacles for the tables of dignitaries, well-heeled couples, high-rollers giddy with luck well spent; we spun languid corkscrews through the shining water' (3).

These exotic figures, with tails that 'gleamed as if each scale had been lacquered by hand', develop an obsession with their own optics in observing, for instance, how (one of them) Ruby 'with yellow tans nestled in her billowing hair made the cover of *National Geographic*' (4). Tan plays on the performative gastronomy often staged for diners in contemporary upmarket restaurants, where kitchen labour is on-display, corporeal and integral to the kinesthetic experience of dining. Here, labour is commoditised as a spectacle for its exhibition of migrant bodies as a site of novelty for naive and enthusiastic consumers. Unlike Kho's work, however, in this story Tan never directly refers to the racialised body, leaving the reader to make a precarious assumption about the power relations at stake. Nevertheless, the fish inside the aquarium, inside the casino, become a symbol of the sentient being caught in a machinery of gambling and dissipation in a market-driven space which thrives, at least partly, on its utter disregard for the relationship between human overconsumption of non-human species and imminent environmental collapse. 'The customers did not enjoy our transformations as much as we did', Tan narrates; 'there was a dissonant modulation in their stares, a curdling of the irises' (6).

In a recent essay on aquariums, Ian Buchanan has written about fish as spectacular and gastronomical commodities, especially, and unsurprisingly, when some of the largest aquariums are constructed *inside* the largest shopping malls in the world. Here, raw materials (fish as, essentially, food) are reconstituted for the consumer gaze; turned 'themepark-esque' for the purposes of fulfilling a multiplicity of commercial and visual objectives. It is this combination that gives aquariums and the fish on display their state of 'acute contradictions'. Buchanan writes, 'as commercial enterprises they are both part of the system that is destroying the environment and—potentially—one of the key voices raising the alarm about the scale and pace of the destruction of the environment' (7). Tan's narrators exemplify these paradoxical market impositions through heightened awareness of their individual circumstances trapped inside the glass tank as well as the extent to which they dominate the very gaze that will ultimately seek to destroy them: 'At first we wondered: What was it about us that disturbed the clients so thoroughly? But then Opal refracted the question: What was it about us that they so loved to begin with?' (7). In their curiously anthropomorphic understanding of the activity taking place around them, they also resist their plight by turning their gaze back

on the patrons of the restaurant. 'When we did stare outwards', they confess, it was deliberate, silent. We liked to lock eyes with a customer about to eat; we liked to watch for the quivering pause of the fork to the mouth' (6). Overtly examining customers, they reverse the power dynamics of watching the restaurant patrons, who are now clearly unsettled by their overt acts of looking. The ways that Tan's characters engage with the 'general gaze' in order to deliberately establish a new threshold of visibility is a sharp commentary on the possibility of resisting contemporary globalised labor, underpinned by an apparatus that wants to render the individual as a describable, analysable object. By playing into (and playing with) the observational dynamic of the restaurant, Tan therefore uses the trope of the glass tank, both literally and metaphorically, to comment on these new forms of neoliberal game of consensual monopoly.

Thus, when read through the refracted gazes that permeate many of the stories in the collection, Tan's work can be seen as a crucial commentary on the markers of our contemporary economic and surveillant crises: disaster capitalism, all-consuming datafication and aggressive vetting. Or, as Leah Jing McIntosh observes, the 'collection speaks often to ugly feelings' that characterise 'a desperate and dizzying lack of agency in a neoliberal world'. Tan imbricates multiple speculative worlds to map new imaginaries in the context of unfolding apocalypse perpetuated by excessive mutation of the market. For Tan, then, as well as for Cho and Koh, the internalisation of the conditions of late capitalism becomes a site of both misery and perverse euphoria, exemplifying the ultimate commodification of human and labour in which, to use Zygmunt Bauman's terms in *Consuming Life* (2007), humans become 'the merchandise and the marketing agents, the goods and the travelling salespeople'.

This paper has been our way of thinking with a developing aesthetics for literary representation in Australian Literature. Constructing their fictional worlds in and via the commoditised 'object', Cho, Koh, and Tan enact a kind of cultural resistance that affords a new engagement with the literary marketplace. For these writers, the self-conscious morphing of identity is not an internalisation or reproduction of the normative gaze that attempts to categorise and pigeon-hole post-diasporic responses to migration and cultural identity. Through a perversion of identity in the context of contemporary media-saturated click-bait culture, exploited labour, and a literary scene that seems ineffectual in establishing its own terms outside of the commercial impulse of late capitalism, Cho, Koh and Tan resist straight, symptomatic interpretation. Post-diasporic aesthetics is by no means defeatist, or oblivious to minority communities' histories of struggle. The 'post' in post-diasporic short story harbours an announcement of a movement-making group of emerging Australian writers, who are experimenting with identity as an exercise already reduced to ineptitude by the market economy.

KEYVAN ALLAHYARI is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the English Department at the University of Tübingen. He is currently working on his monograph about the author Peter Carey, and a book project on the militarisation of border regimes and world literature.

TYNE SUMNER is a researcher and teacher at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Her work explores the relationship between literature and surveillance, with a focus on the ways that poetry is engaged with concepts such as privacy, identity, confession and subjectivity in the context of digital technology and the increasing datafication of everyday life.

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