

Michelle Har Kim
kimmiche@usc.edu
Department of Comparative Literature
USC Comparative Literature Symposium With Professor Naoki Sakai
January 29, 2009

Becoming-Animal in an Asian Americas: Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *God of Luck*
and a Watanabe Triptych (Three Poems by José Watanabe)

This paper is a part of a larger exploration of “Literature of the Asian Americas”, a field that allows us to productively think about the blind spots of traditionally defined Asian American literature now contextualized by movement towards more global and transnational purviews of diaspora. Naoki Sakai’s “Nationality and the Politics of the ‘Mother Tongue’” (in the compilation *Deconstructing Nationality*) helps us think critically about the axioms of an Asian American literature that include a core Anglophonicityⁱ and the assumption of the U.S. as the archetypal place where immigrant identity can be negotiated. It is through the various pluralized “American” incommensurabilities of Asian American literature, along with its traditional narrative of racialized individuals’ ascent toward replete national subjecthood, that Asian America is now conspicuously reckoning with the myth of its own monoethnic society. (It would be interesting to see the U.S.’s “tolerance,” if you will, for different kinds of “multiculture”ⁱⁱ particularly now as the multiculturalist legacy of Civil Rights is immanent to President Obama’s tenure). We could call this myth of a monoethnic society a discrete pluralism, the idea that a singular U.S.-Asian American ethnos will always trump the potentially discrepant variety of stable sub-ethnicities that comprise a greater “Asian America.” Commitment to this ethnos—let’s call it, redundantly, exceptional Asian Americanness—is only emphasized by proliferating inclusions of “new” intra-Asian American voices, i.e., excavations of Chinese American Literature, South Asian American Literature, Korean American literature and so onⁱⁱⁱ, voices once hidden or repressed by more powerful or official narratives. The trope

of sub-generic and the sub-ethnic excavation not only mimics the discreteness of Asian American voices within “multiculturalism” or ethnic literatures in general; it also secures the idea that, to quote Professor Sakai, “communication of ideas and sentiment among [us] is guaranteed from the start,” and “that ethnic identity can be directly and objectively experienced within everyday life” (2).

If Asian American literature has understood itself as part and parcel of a shared U.S./American experience produced by the inaccessibilities of subjecthood or citizenship, its voices are also brought to light through a dogged liberal exceptionalism that emblemizes the adept hero. It is through the priority of the narrativizable voice and its discoverability that order is afforded to a “chaosmos” or otherwise inviable community. Like the modern novel (according to Bakhtin) and the *Bildungsroman* (according to Moretti), Asian American literature has been based on a quantitative expansion and insertion of “voices,” that is, the proliferation of points of view rather than the inverse: a Deleuzean *sense of point of view*, or the conditions by which there can be a perception of variation^{iv}. This grappling is particularly evident for Deleuze in the work of the painter Francis Bacon, as Deleuze describes it in *The Logic of Sensation*. “[W]here it is impossible to reconstitute any plausible scenario, “a sense of point of view is given” (Conley 138).

I would like to consider the work of two authors as part of a shifting corpus of Asian American literature that is headed toward a productive body of immanent incoherence: an Asian American literature of the Americas. The first is Ruthanne Lum McCunn’s *God of Luck*, a novel about a Chinese coolie’s escape from a nineteenth-century Peruvian guano mine. The second is the poetry of José Watanabe, from whose work I have selected three poems for this presentation. I’d like to suggest seeing them as a kind of Baconian *trptych*, like the triptychs of Francis Bacon

that, according to Deleuze, resemble “movements or parts of a piece of music” that harbor “a circular organization . . . rather than a linear one” (60). McCunn’s *God of Luck* contextualizes Watanabe’s theme of escape from the radar of anthropocentrism, the idea of man as both center and “central fact of the universe, to which all surrounding facts have reference” (OED)^v.

McCunn and Watanabe both contribute richly to Asian American literature, but it is Watanabe in particular who offers the field a Deleuzian “line of flight,” or an “unpredictable creativity” (to use the words of historian David Noble).

A celebrated Peruvian poet who passed away in 2007, Watanabe from the get go disturbs the notion of stable ethnic categorization (one of the premiere points of authorization for ethnic literatures in general). His father migrated from Japan to Peru in 1916, and met his mother, an indigenous woman, on the Laredo sugar hacienda in the northern province of Trujillo, in the region of La Libertad. Both parents were sugarcane workers. Revered in Peru, Watanabe is often pigeonholed as an author heavily influenced by Japanese literature and culture. In a TV interview the poet was once asked if he could speak and write Japanese. Acting quite serious, he said something to the effect of: “I did long ago, but I remember so little of it now.”^{vi} Watanabe indeed neither spoke nor wrote Japanese, and his resolution here, which he would later recall as total comedy, gives us a sense of the demands through which he often had to navigate.

As U.S. critics looking to qualify Watanabe’s work as Asian American literature, we might anticipate various representations or allegories of trials regarding the poet’s ethnic and cultural difference with respect to mainstream Peruvian society, themes about his father’s immigration to Peru and assimilation as an *issei* migrant, for instance, or narratives about work in the canefields or growing up Japanese Peruvian in the small town of Laredo. However, such emblematic narratives of success or tragedy do not take center stage. The ordinary or

extraordinary one who emblemizes the whole is never thematized in Watanabe's work. A palpable motif in his lean and haunting poetry occurs through serial and captivating encounters with animals, in a short-circuiting of the priority and singularity of human life. It might be helpful to think of the word *l'animot*—which we cannot help but hear in plural as *animaux*—Derrida's expression of the artificial clumping of all non-rational animals, that is, the mess of all life swept under the rug of the inadequate term “animal.” Watanabe's conjurings of birds, dogs, fish and other forms of animate and inanimate life do not deploy the animal as a discrete metaphor. They are like the uncanny cat who stares at Derrida—it “[i]sn't the *figure* of a cat,” he clarifies, or some “allegory for all the cats on earth” (6). What might change if we see a cat's life as co-incident to ours, rather than incidental “animality”? We humans have presumptuously “given [our]selves the word that enables [us] to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond” (Derrida 32).

Humans and animals alike appear at the edge of Watanabe's world as figures short-circuited in their figuration, unable to serve as holistic metaphors of individual emancipation. Watanabe thus incites us to read against *humanitas*, or “against” the human subject as the point through which we can understand and know ourselves^{vii}. To borrow from Deleuze's description of Francis Bacon, “[i]nstead of formal correspondences,” Watanabe dabbles in “a *zone of the indiscernibility or undecidability* between man and animal” (*Sensation* 20, Deleuze's emphasis). Bacon spectacularly explodes the anthropocentrism that was once taken for granted in painting and, we might add, in the realist novel: the obvious “delineat[ion] . . . of man's architectural or natural environment around the human figure, the setting in which he was the measure and central point of reference” (Ficacci 12).

Although its narrative is sparked with the birds that fly from the burning of the sugarcane fields after the harvest, Watanabe's poem "The Ice Guardian" neither protagonizes an animal nor "paints" in abstractions devoid of recognizable living beings. Disguised as amenable to allegory, this poem exhibits a Deleuzian (and Guattarian) "becoming-animal," a *humanitas* strangely without anthropocentrism. It moves away from man-as-measure as it exploits literature's peculiar ability—like Bacon's paint—to "desubjectify consciousness and passion," as Deleuze and Guattari put it (*Thousand* 134). In this poem, as in Watanabe's many others, neither consciousness nor passion originates or is contained within discrete human boundaries.

El guardián del hielo

Y coincidimos en el terral
el heladero con su carretilla averiada
y yo
que corría tras los pájaros huidos del fuego
de la zafra.
También coincidió el sol.
En esa situación, cómo negarse a un favor llano:
el heladero me pidió cuidar su efímero hielo.

Oh cuidar lo fugaz bajo el sol ...

El hielo empezó a derretirse
bajo mi sombra, tan desesperada
como inútil.

Diluyéndose
dibujaba seres esbeltos y primordiales
que solo un instante tenían firmeza
de cristal de cuarzo
y enseguida eran formas puras
como de montaña o planeta
que se devasta.

No se puede amar lo que tan rápido fuga.
Ama rápido, me dijo el sol.
Y así aprendí, en su ardiente y perverso reino,
a cumplir con la vida:
yo soy el guardián del hielo.

The Ice Guardian

So we came across each other in the breeze
the ice vendor with his broken cart
and I
who would chase the birds that had escaped the burning
of the cane.
The sun too had found us.
At that moment, who would deny a mere favor:
the vendor asked me to watch his ephemeral wares.

Oh to care for evanescence under the sun ...

The ice began to soften
under my shadow, as useless
as it was desperate

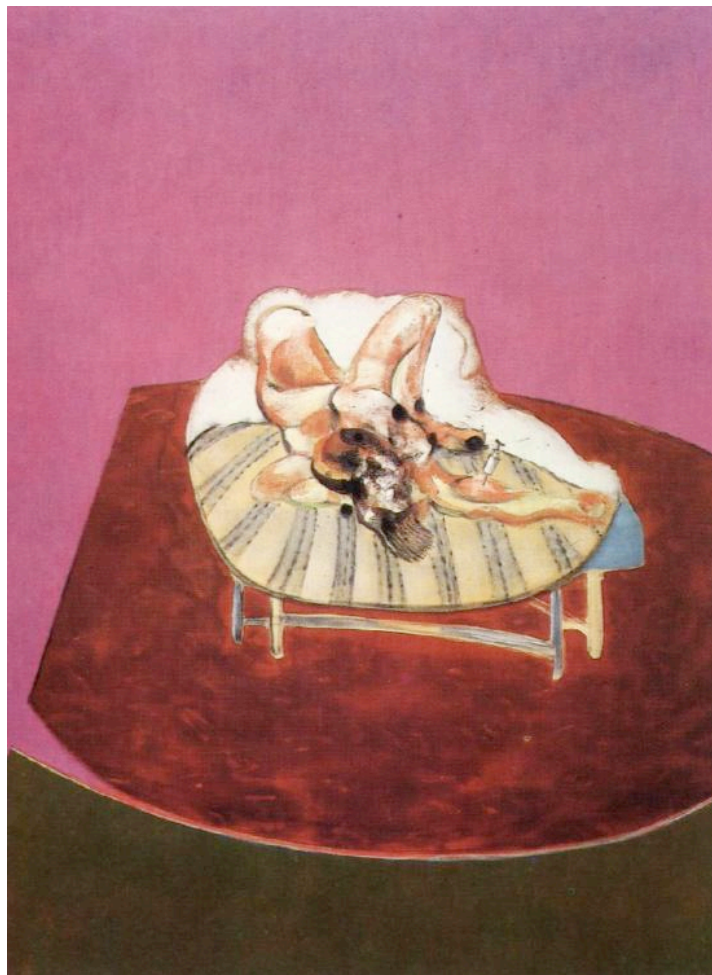
In its dissolution
It traced svelte and primordial beings
with the fleeting density
of quartz crystal
suddenly they were pure forms
as of mountains or planets
abruptly ravaged.

How impossible to love what intensely fades.
Love quickly, said the sun.
And I learned, in his perverse and ardent kingdom
to honor life:
I am the guardian of ice.

from *Cosas del cuerpo* (1999)

It would seem that there is a clear metaphor here, an easy equivalence between melting ice and precarious human life. An ostensibly bounded substance or experience, this thingly and

icy “life” oscillates between semi-rigid form and opaque semblances. Its guardianship has failed, as the places of the narrator, and the worlding he unwittingly witnesses, destabilize and are rendered in hazy description. A splitting narrator (who manages events in simultaneous past and present modes), a sunny potentate, the vendor, and evanescence itself all swim between subject and object, perhaps reminding us of Bacon’s *Lying figure with hypodermic syringe* (1963), in which Deleuze sees “a body attempting to pass through [a] syringe” (*Sensation* 17). Unwilling to bear the depth of extended metaphors, Watanabe’s poem seems to emulate Bacon’s “solitary wrestling in a *shallow depth*[] that rips the painting away from all narrative but also from all symbolization” (*Sensation* xv).



Lying figure with hypodermic syringe (1963)^{viii}

Human or not, “depth” of life is not what is at stake, even if our desire is piqued for a palpable accumulation of experience that would enable the narrator to overcome his anxious failure to capture, or salvage the vague primordial things, amorphous quartz, and disappearing planets. Absence of any formal communication occludes the sensation of depth and allegory; the only specter of community that remains is the trust of the anonymous ice vendor. We are left with a flatness of individual experience, a strange ambivalence, and an un-guarded complacency regarding the deficiency of communication or a language that would adequately translate the ice’s transmissions, its uncanny omnipresence or extratemporality. Happenstance encounters of vendor, narrator, and sun contort the figural power of the rational man and his ice-object, all eliciting the desire to “know” more of, and to be a part of, the melting diorama that betrays no human correspondence. As Bacon’s figures often do, the narrator and his objects here bleed into each other, and all over the place. If this resolution with no clear community can be understood as a kind of hybridity, “The Ice Guardian” activates, to quote Claire Colebrook, “The human [that] becomes more than itself ... not by affirming its humanity ... but by becoming-hybrid with what is not itself” (129). This is becoming-animal, a response to Deleuze and Guattari’s question: “What if one became animal or plant through literature”? (*Thousand 4*).

Let’s now take a look at an excerpt from Ruthanne Lum McCunn’s *God of Luck*:

The enormous barking slugs are, I’ve learned, sea lions. Their droppings and those of birds are called *guano* in Spanish. And so effective is this guano supposed to be as fertilizer that, although there are five-hundred diggers on this island, we can’t get ahead of the demand; there are always well over a hundred ships from around the world waiting—most for two or even three months—to be loaded.

At night we have a respite from the head-splitting clamor of the sea lions and birds. But even in sleep, the sharp, pisslike smell of guano pinches my nose, eyes, and throat, and when I begin digging at dawn, a dank, dense mist wraps around my bones. By midmorning, the sun burns off the last trace of mist, the heat grows stifling as the days before a big wind, my chest threatens to burst from lack of air [N]o rain falls here

[My] axe strikes ground, and my whole body judders. Grit nettles my calves. Chalky powder spirals up, thickening the haze from hundreds of axes hammering the hard-packed guano, shovels tossing crumbling clods through screens, filling baskets and wheelbarrows with the dist, dust that clogs my nostrils, seeps through my lips, coats my tongue, settles in my throat.

My eyes, afire, flood. Snorting and coughing, I swipe at them with the sodden rag around my neck. Nothing clears. I cannot see beyond my hands and feet. But the devils driving us have eyes like hawks, the strength to send us spinning with a kick, to cut us down with their rawhide whips, and although my arms protest, I raise my axe, bring it down. (McCunn 163-5)

God of Luck, published in 2008 in English, provides another topos for my discussion of Watanabe and animal becoming. It offers a newly-excavated geography and subject positionality for Asian American literature—that is, the nineteenth-century guano industry and diasporic life in Latin America from the point of view of the indentured coolie. Evelyn Hu-Dehart tells us that during the 27-year span from 1847 to 1874,

as many as 225,000 Chinese indentured or contract laborers ... were sent to Cuba, still a Spanish colony, and Peru, which had become an independent nation earlier in the

nineteenth century. Eighty percent or more were destined for the sugar plantations of both societies and for the *guano* (bird droppings) pits and cotton plantations of Perú. Roughly 100,000 coolies arrived at these guano mines (McCunn site), after about ten thousand died in transit (Hu-Dehart). After slavery was officially abolished in Peru in 1854, “Chinese men supplanted black slaves and worked alongside a small number of free blacks and Indians from the *sierra* (highland): on some plantations, they constituted the sole labor force” (Hu-Dehart 170^{ix}). Historian David Hollett explains that during guano’s commodification and exportation, the industry used a gamut of “forced Indian labor, followed by [black] slaves, then ... Chinese coolies’ [sic], and [later] Japanese and Polynesian workers” (25). To convey the immense global scope of the industry, Jimmy Skaggs notes that “countless vessels flying the flags of Great Britain, France, Portugal, Spain and the United States hauled an estimated three-quarters of a million Chinese to Australia, Brazil, Cuba, Hawaii, Peru, Tahiti, and the United States between 1849 and 1881” (162).

McCunn relates a story that has not (to my knowledge) been told in U.S. Anglophone fiction: the journey of the indentured Chinese coolie during what one historian calls the era of “Chinese bondage in Peru”^x, an era of forced labor that served the begrudging abolition of Black slave labor across the globe. During the mid-nineteenth century as scientists discovered guano’s incredible fertilizing properties, and as “railroads spurred the development of commercial farming[,] ... [a] series of mad rushes ensued as guano islands were discovered, scraped clean, and abandoned” (Schwarz). Mined on few islands, the most lucrative guano was on Peru’s arid Chincha Islands. This is Hollett’s description of the *las islas Chincha*; note that *God of Luck*’s “realism” emerges from this type of relatively unknown historiography:

[T]he centuries-old deposits had become hard and compacted, and in many places had to

be blasted with gunpowder.... Then the stones and sand ... had to be separated before it could be conveyed by ships' launches or to the waiting vessels [T]he islands are just three rocks, their brown surface cracked by a hot tropical sun whose savage beams are rarely intercepted by a cloud—rocks upon which no rain has fallen for centuries. Here men toiled at work as dangerous as mining, watched over by brutal overseers whose task was to ensure that each man fulfilled his daily quota of digging, moving, or loading the foul-smelling material. (118)

Long before nineteenth-century guano would rival twentieth-century petro-dollars (Hollett 18), the Incas understood the power of guano for agriculture, decreeing that anyone who disturbed the birds would be put to death^{xi}. Is this a priority of life that resembles the nineteenth-century cemeteries on guano mines, places that “reportedly overflowed with the rotting corpses of those who failed to survive and ... [were] buried in graves too shallow to protect remains from scavenging dogs, [their] human bones ... scattered about”? (Skaggs 61). As a major importer of foreign guano, the fields of the U.S., we can speculate, were literally fertilized by human digger bodies, in a inhuman cycle of shit, labor, and profit.

God of Luck narrates the story of Ah Lung, a young man kidnapped from his small Cantonese village and forced on a miserable journey to Macau. He is then forced to make a passage across the Pacific on a boat with other soon-to-be laborers. Ah Lung is swindled into signing a five-year labor contract to dig guano on the Chincha Islands. Pedro Chufat, the island's only shopkeeper and non-digger Chinese resident, smugly tells Ah Lung that “there's no hope of escape for a digger [here] like there is ... on the mainland” (McCunn 189). Caught between the desire to take his life and the virtual suicide of an unprecedented escape, Ah Lung hatches a careful plan to elude the attention of guano mine overseers and other physically

exhausted and psychically broken workers. He precariously approaches several *mestizo* boatmen with his painstaking and broken phrases of Spanish. Endeared to the boatmen, Ah Lung manages an impromptu language of gestures and bodily contact as they mercifully hide him in their empty supply boat on the return trip from the Chinchas, back to Perú's Pisco coast. The boatmen leave him frightened and bewildered in a cave on the mainland—at the base of a promontory. “Vaya con Díos,” one repeats to him. Díos? Who is this Díos, Ah Lung wonders as he waits, with spells of patience and anxiety.

Does *God of Luck* allow us to widen or globalize the scope of Asian American Literature? Does it enable an Asian Literature of the Americas that was once of a single-American rubric, at home within the geographical borders of the U.S. nation-state? The Chinese characters in McCunn's novel, which is written in English, neither arrive to the United States nor speak English; the text often obscures the “fact” that the text is thought, spoken or narrated in Cantonese. Spanish, on the other hand, is not elided this way; it percolates through and interrupts the narrative, as in the above passage. In this sense *God of Luck* does not subscribe to the implicit Anglophonicity of traditional Asian American literature. Without ascribing Ah Lung an overt desire for national citizenship, McCunn's novel instead follows capital garnered from guano (what César Vallejo will playfully call “fecapital ponk” in his 1922 book *Trilce*). Despite the profiteering of U.S. magnates and U.S. national policy that sought to profit from this rich overseas resource (the Guano Act of 1856, for example, vested U.S. citizens with the power to take possession of any “island, rock, or key” as territory “appertaining to the United States”^{xii}), McCunn's novel offers a new mapping for Asian American literature that does not imagine the U.S. as a necessary stepping stone or finale for Asian American immigration.

One would be hesitant, however, to qualify this work as a “transnational breakthrough” for Asian American literature (even if we bracket the precarious concept of “transnationality,” that often fails to undermine, but rather reifies the nation-state). The novel’s authority appears to be wedded to McCunn’s Chinese ancestry; her personal website notes that she is “an Eurasian of Chinese and Scottish descent” and cites a newspaper’s hailing of the author as “an American-Chinese author of remarkable talent.” In the words of another website dedicated to multicultural curricula, “McCunn has uncovered stories that have helped to detail what we know about nineteenth century Chinese and Chinese American lives.”^{xiii} The positioning of ethnic authorization here meets the demand for the Asian American who attests to “the Asian American experience,” the Latina about “Latina experience,” etc.—so that Plato won’t kick us out of the polis. We might see *God of Luck* as a response to the demand of “truth” from the ethnically authorized author who must realistically vouch for the racialized protagonist. It complies with “the burden of authenticity” that Kandice Chuh has claimed to always imbue “Asian American literatures [with] some immanent, ‘real’ meaning” (20).

Can we reckon with this new text without subscribing to a rubric of intra-multicultural Asian American insertions, a rubric that anticipates an endless wheel of of Ishmael-like counter-heroes? In C.L.R. James’ ruminations on *Moby Dick*, James deposes Ishmael as the obvious hero of the *Pequod*. He “promotes” the unruly crew as Melville’s unlikely protagonist in a hydrarchical move—borrowing the rhizomatic concept of “hydrarchy” from Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker’s many headed-hydra as an antidote to the outstanding One who represents Herculean progress. When the crew stars as *Moby Dick*’s protagonist, it teems with a multiplicity that cannot be formalized^{xiv}.

Can the coolie pertain to this informal multiplicity? In her recent essay “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” Lisa Lowe explains this historical silence as anchored in the laborers’ murky politico-human status. Coolies are latest nineteenth-century labor about which no one can definitively answer the humanist question: Are they a haunting remnant of black slavery or pioneering mavericks of freedom? (Jung 680). Premised upon a formalized freedom built upon colonial labor in the Americas (Lowe 193), this question stages a jockeying between voicelessness and voice, or between the human and the in-human artifice, *l’animot*. Is it possible to understand the coolie, or other indentured labor communities, apart from the regime of universalized human freedom? Would the incorporation of *God of Luck* as a “new” Asian American voice canonize it as a *cimarron* or runaway slave narrative for Asian American literature, emblemizing it as an example of the liberal path to freedom and no-longer benighted individual consciousness?

To return to Lowe, the recovery or discovery of previously unrepresented voices—or the compensation or translation of silence—would all be in line with the old-school canonical claims of securable and representative plurality. Instead of embracing the vocal hero, we might ask what is necessarily repressed or hidden when we subscribe to a regime of realist and narrativizable voice, that is, a regime that can only “see” the colonized or imperial subject as not-yet-human or to-be-human, that is, in the face of imminent political and economic completion? Ah Lung’s heroism and pursuit of inalienable liberty achieves nothing short of refusing the conditions of his possible extermination. But is the articulation of his “freedom” even possible without those who remain behind, those whose deaths and lives of labor will become, as Eduardo Cadava has phrased it, the “guano of history”? Or does Ah Lung’s journey rather expose the contours of unfreedom as nonhuman or inhuman, as becoming-human—rather than becoming-

animal—presupposes legibility within the regime of communities defined by the (extra)ordinary One, the universalized individual who can bear the figuration of every-one, that is, everyone within the bounds of an ostensibly clear and coherent community.

Without the work of excavation, however, we know that official narratives, like guano, petrify with time. In this sense *God of Luck* provides an important narrative not only for a U.S. rubric of multiculturalism but also for the major poetry (draw from Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between "major" and "minor" literature) of Cesar Vallejo (1892-1938), considered by many to be Peru's greatest modern poet. Here is Clayton Eshelman's translation of the opening poem from Vallejo's *Trilce*:

Quién hace tanta bulla, y ni deja
testar las islas que van quedando.

Un poco más de consideración
en cuanto será tarde, temprano
y se aquilatará mejor
el guano, la simple calabrina tesórea
que brinda sin querer,
en el insular corazón,
salobre alcatraz, a cada hialóidea
grupada.

Un poco más de consideración,
y el mantillo líquido, seis de la tarde
DE LOS MÁS SOBERBIOS BEMOLES

Y la península párase
por la espalda, abozalada, impertérrita
en la línea mortal del equilibrio.

Who's making all that racket, and not even leaving
testation to the islands beginning to appear.

A little more consideration
as it will be late, early,
and easier to assay
the guano, the simple fecapital ponk
a brackish gannet
toasts unintentionally,
in the insular heart, to each hyaloid
squall.

A little more consideration,
and liquid muck, six in the evening
OF THE MOST GRANDIOSE B-FLATS.

And the peninsula raises up
from behind, muzziled, unterrified
on the fatal balance line.

Written in 1922, after the height of the golden guano era, there are no Chinese laborers here. Vallejo indeed sketches no human presence at all, only hints of what Eshelman translates as "fecapital ponk": stinky, capital-generating feces. But the anthropomorphism of the islands, their will despite the lack of consideration for them, are hauntings of recent inhumanity, of exploitation of labor and natural resources, and of the absent voice. This reminds us of Cadava's reading of Emerson's "Fate" as a text that allows the idea of America to be haunted by death and

dispossession: “the German and Irish millions, like the Negro,” claims Emerson in 1860, “have a great deal of guano in their destiny. They are ferried over the Atlantic, to ditch and to drudge, to make corn cheap, and then to lie down prematurely to make a spot of green grass on the prairie”^{xv}. Here, as in Bacon and Watanabe, is an Emersonian-American animal becoming, the haunting of subjectivity outside the bounds of the enfranchised and formalized human.

In his essay “I’ve Been (Re)Working on the Railroad” (2002), David Eng discusses how the fictions of Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin engage with the silent absence of nineteenth century Chinese railroad workers in the classic photograph of the “Golden Spike” ceremony at Utah’s Promontory Summit. As we know, no Chinese laborers appear in this photograph that celebrates the joining of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads in May 1869. Kingston and Chin reckon with this absence through looking against or awry at the mimetic realism of photography (Eng 37). Despite the apparent fixity of its visual field, a photograph—like a poem, we would add—incites “memory’s errant wanderings” (56) and “can bring us to a place where we have never been before” (57). Riffing off an ostensibly standard or “official” visual scenario, Eng haunts the scene with a ghastly visitation of laborers whom we cannot see.



The ceremony for the driving of the golden spike at Promontory Summit, Utah on May 10, 1869^{xvi}

Can we read the first poem of César Vallejo's *Trilce* as if it were a spirit photograph, in a way that clears a space of haunting? John Harvey explains that the genre of spirit photography claimed to show those who were dead as though they were alive too [T]he "now dead" lived, not in cryogenic suspension, as a perpetual moment of life (frozen before death and captured on film), but with the inference that the photograph represented one instant in a continuity of life that extended eternally beyond the bounds of the exposure. (156)

In this vein, would it also be possible to read the Watanabe's "Rats and Seagulls" as a haunted photograph, unable to repress a history of indentured labor? (San Andres, mentioned in the poem, lies off the Pisco coast to which Ah Lung fled the guano mines.) Can we triangulate "Rats and Seagulls," Vallejo's poem, and *God of Luck*, as an Asian American triptych?

Ratas y gaviotas

En el promontorio, a media altura,
 donde no llega el romper de las olas,
 hay una gruta honda como nave de catedral.
 Por las delgadas cornisas que dan al mar
 algunas ratas equilibrian y alcanzan la cueva
 después de saciarse con los despojos de las mareas.
 Y por el aire entran las gaviotas que anidan
 en las altas salientes. Sólo sus alas blanquean
 en la oscuridad que desciende hasta el piso
 donde brillan, supongo, los ojillos rojos de las ratas.
 Es difícil ver la cueva. Al frente sólo está el mar abierto.
 Los pescadores que hoy me llevan a puerto San Andrés
 navegan frente a este aislado promontorio arrullados
 por el motor de sus pequeños botes. Los pensamientos
 parecen haber cesado: las ratas y las gaviotas
 no son viejas alegorías. Todos
 hemos entrado en una rara inocencia.
 El mar también se ha despojado de sus historias
 y nos lleva con la pura física de navegación.

Rats and Seagulls

Within the promontory, halfway up
 past the break of the waves
 there is a cavern, deep like a cathedral's nave.
 Along the delicate cornices overlooking the ocean
 several rats balance themselves and reach the cave
 after sating themselves with the waters' plunder.
 Through the air enter seagulls that come to nest
 in the higher projections. Only wings flash
 in the darkness that descends to the ground
 where, I imagine, the rats' red eyeballs glimmer.
 It is hard to see the cave. Its entrance is only open ocean.
 Today the fishermen who row me to the port of San Andrés
 navigate the face of this isolated promontory, lulled
 by the motor of its bobbings. All thoughts
 appear to have ceased: rats and gulls
 are not old allegories. We have all
 entered into a strange innocence.
 The ocean too has stripped itself of stories
 carrying us in the pure physics of navigation.

from *Banderas detrás de la niebla* (2006)

As in Vallejo's poem, there are no coolies here, but there is a nearly absent narrator who in a sense loses himself in, or shares himself with, the nearby animals, the ocean and the cliff. This is a failed Romantic bliss, a strange in-the-zone human abstraction in gazing up at the promontory, where Emerson might have liked to perch. In an alleged absorption into nature and the purity of theoretical physics and of navigation, neither we nor the narrator can disavow the scene's layers of historical hauntings—even if we foreclose allegory and memory's "errant wanderings." I would again compare Watanabe's poetry to Bacon's half-human and half-meat figures. Where representation is putatively given and abstracted from the conditions of its existence (like the ostensibly representative body that comprises "Asian Americans"), Bacon and Watanabe "converg[e] on a similar problem: both renounce[] the domain of representation and instead [take] the *conditions* of representation as their object"^{xvii} (*Sensation* xiii-xiv, Deleuze's emphasis). Can we haunt Watanabe's 2006 "Ratas y gaviotas" and Vallejo's 1922 *Trilce* with mid-nineteenth-century diggers, in a way that sparks anthropomorphism and not

anthropocentrism? Can we read the energy of a conspicuous in-humanity that makes the elision of racialized human traffic more palpable?

El nieto

Una rana
emergió del pecho desnudo y recién muerto
de mi abuelo, Don Calixto Varas.
Libre de ataduras de venas y arterias, huyó
roja y húmeda de sangre
hasta desaparecer en un estanque de regadío.

La vieron
con los ojos, con la boca, con las orejas
y así quedó para siempre
en la palabra convencida, y junto
a otra palabra, de igual poder
para conjurarla.
Así la noche transcurría eternamente en equilibrio
porque en Laredo
el mundo se organizaba como es debido:
en la honda boca de los mayores.

Ahora, cuando la verdad de la ciencia que me hurga
es insoportable,
yo, descompuesto y rabioso, pido a los doctores
que me crean que la gente no muere de un órgano enfermo
sino de un órgano que inicia una secreta metamorfosis
hasta ser animal maduro y dispuesto a abandonarnos.
Me inyectan.
En mi somnolencia siento aterrado
que mi corazón
hace su sístole y su diástole en papada de rana.

The Grandson

A frog
emerged from the bare and newly-dead chest
of my grandfather, Don Calixto Varas.
Freed from its mesh of veins and arteries, it fled
red and slick with blood
and disappeared in an irrigation ditch.

They all saw it
with their eyes, mouths, and ears
and it remains
within the cogent word, beside
other words of equal power
to conjure it.
The night continued in eternal equilibrium
for in Laredo
the world organized itself properly:
through the profound lips of the elders.

Now, when the stinging certainty of science
is unbearable,
I, furiously decomposing, ask the doctors
to believe we cannot die of a failing organ
unless it sparks a secret metamorphosis
and matures into an animal willing to abandon us.
They inject me.
In my somnolence I am terrified:
my heart
beats its systole and diastole within the chin of a frog.

from *El huso de la palabra* (1989)

As I have tried to argue, animals in Watanabe's poetry—along with the emergent “animals” of narrator and speaker—do not serve to distill or conjecture about human experience. They rather attempt to dissolve, in Baconian fashion, all humanist grounds of reason. In “The Grandson,” the appearance of the grandfather-as-frog muddles in-human boundaries and baffles all reasonable explanation. The secure axis of the human has no place here; this poem, to borrow Akira Lippit's comment on Deleuze and Guattari, maps “against every convention of mapping, a terrain open to animal being” (128). Watanabe does not speak directly to Asian American literature's claim to cultural hybridities (i.e., the founding rhetoric of being *neither* fully Asian

nor fully American); his work generates questions about the constitution of liberal narratives of human progress and the quest for narrativizable voice. “Minorities ... are objectively definable states, states of language, ethnicity, or sex with their own ghetto territorialities,” Deleuze and Guattari tell us, “but they must also be thought of as seeds, crystals of becoming whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and deterritorializations of the mean or majority”

(*Thousand* 106). We might see Watanabe as providing us with a “strategic anti-essentialism” (to borrow from Kandice Chuh’s re-casting of Spivak’s phrase) (10-11)—a sense of essentialism as a point of view, a sense that gestures beyond the subject-driven primacy of Asian American literatures and perhaps ethnic literatures more generally.

ⁱ This Anglophonicity is only corroborated by Asian American literature’s tropes of “broken” English, pigeon or creolized English, or the inability or refusal to speak English.

ⁱⁱ “Multiculture” is Paul Gilroy’s preferred term in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ As in, for example, King Kok Cheung, *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

^{iv} Tom Conley explains: “Point of view is generally assumed to be a key to the representation of subjectivity in the modern novel. It is what literary critics in the wake of Percy Lubbock’s studies of Henry James’s ‘reflectors’ consign to relativity. It would result from the staging of a statement uttered by the figure *x*, consonant with her psychology and character that elicits a response, stated by *y* and in the tenor of his or her character, affecting the emotive condition both of *x* and of witness *z*; *y* emits a reaction that causes *z* to change the tenor of speech because of a frown seen on the forehead of *x*, and so on. Through his relationship with Bacon’s painting Deleuze takes this a step further. Point of view is a ‘point of view on variation’; that is, it is the condition in which an eventual subject grasps a variation. It is not a variation of truth according to the way a subject looks at something, ‘but the condition in which there appears to the subject the truth of a variation,’ what Deleuze calls ‘the very idea of a Baroque perspective.’ Point of view is ‘enveloped in variation, just as variation is enveloped in point of view.’ In Bacon the gazing figure bears witness or attends to the variation that it elicits. Thanks to a composition and treatment unique to Bacon’s world, where it is impossible to reconstitute any plausible scenario, a sense of point of view is given.” Conley here cites *Le Pli: Leibniz et le Baroque* (Paris: Minuit, 1988) 27, 29. [Translation available.]

^v This is cited from the OED definition of *anthropocentric*.

-
- ^{vi} The poet Michaela Chirif, Watanabe's wife, told me this in an interview.
- ^{vii} See Nishitani Osamu, "Anthropos and Humanitas," *Deconstructing Nationality*, ed. Sakai et. al.
- ^{viii} from <http://faculty.dwc.edu/wellman/syringe.htm>; also in Vol. 2 of Deleuze's *Logique De La Sensation*.
- ^{ix} Hu-Dehart here quotes her 1992 article
- ^x Stewart qtd. in Skaggs 162
- ^{xi} Hollet cites Carleton Beale, *Fire in the Andes* (London: J.P. Lippincott & Company, 1934) 35.
- ^{xii} U.S. Code, http://assembler.law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode48/usc_sec_48_00001411----000-.html
- ^{xiii} Annenberg Media Channel website:
<http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/hslit/session7/aw/author2.html>
- ^{xiv} I got this idea from Don Pease when I heard him speak about James notion of a "migrancy" that cannot be formalized.
- ^{xv} Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate," qtd. in Cadava 143
- ^{xvi} "1869-Golden Spike.jpg," Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1869-Golden_Spike.jpg), taken from the National Archives.
- ^{xvii} Here Deleuze is commenting on the convergence of "[m]odern art and modern philosophy" (*Sensation* xiii-xiv).

Works Cited

- Cadava, Eduardo. "The Guano of History." *Cities Without Citizens*. Ed. Aaron Levy and Eduardo Cadava. Slought Foundation, 2004. 137-166.
- Cheung, King-Kok. *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Chuh, Kandice. *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.
- Colebrook, C. *Gilles Deleuze*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Conley, Tom. Afterword to Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon, Logique De La Sensation*. Vol. 2. Paris: Éditions de la différence, 1981.
- . *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Trans. Marie-Louise Mallet. New York: Fordham UP, 2008.
- Eng, David. *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*. Duke UP, 2001.
- Ficacci, Luigi. *Francis Bacon 1909-1992*. Los Angeles: Taschen, 2003.
- Harvey, John. *Photography and Spirit*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007.
- Hollett, David. *More Precious than Gold: The Story of the Peruvian Guano Trade*. Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2008.
- Hu-DeHart, Evelyn. "Opium and Social Control: Coolies on the Plantations of Peru and Cuba." *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1.2 (2005): 169-183.
- James, C. L. R. *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. Ed. Donald E. Pease. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001.
- Jung, Moon-Ho. "Outlawing 'Coolies': Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation." *American Quarterly* 57.3 (2005): 677-701.

Linebaugh, Peter, and Marcus Rediker. *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Verso, 2002.

Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Lowe, Lisa. "The Intimacies of Four Continents." *Haunted By Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*. Ed. Ann Laura Stoler. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.

McCunn, Ruthanne Lum. *God of Luck*. New York: Soho Press, 2007.

---. "The Pacific Slave Trade (Background for God of Luck)." 30 Oct 2008
<<http://www.mccunn.com/>>.

Sakai, Naoki, Brett de Bary, and Iyotani Toshio, eds. *Deconstructing Nationality*. Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2005.

Sakai, Naoki. "Nationality and the 'Mother Tongue'." Introduction to *Deconstructing Nationality*. 1-38.

Schwarz, Fredric D. "Does Guano Drive History?." 12 Jan 2009
<http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/it/2004/4/2004_4_63.shtml>

Skaggs, Jimmy M. *The Great Guano Rush: Entrepreneurs and American Overseas Expansion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1994.

Vallejo, César. *The Complete Poetry: A Bilingual Edition*. Trans. Clayton Eshelman. University of California Press, 2007.

Watanabe, José. *Banderas detrás de la niebla*. Lima: PEISA, 2006.

---. *Cosas del cuerpo*. Lima, Perú: Caballo Rojo, 1999.

---. *El huso de la palabra*. Lima: Seglusa Editores: Editorial Colmillo Blanco, 1989.

Urpeth, James. "Animal Becomings." *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*. Ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004. 37-44.