

EDITOR'S NOTES

*The American poet can no longer write as the citizen of a nation
but an empire, a fact with endless implications...*

— Murat Nemet-Nejat (2003)

When Yedda Morrison & I started *Tripwire* in 1997, among several relatively new currents in the experimental wings of North American poetics was how many emergent poets were rethinking—both formally and as subject matter—how to articulate the emergent networks and discourses of what was just then beginning to be understood as (neoliberal) ‘globalization’. Between 1989 and 9/11 (if you’ll excuse the somewhat lazy periodization and generalizations), neoliberal capitalism—having successfully weathered most mid-century anticolonial movements and integrated newly independent (yet ‘dependent’) states, using IMF and World Bank arm-twisting and debt-baiting alongside a post-Cold War geopolitics of militarist and economic consolidation—had fully transformed the geopolitical landscape such that radical activists, critics, and artists felt the imperative to rethink their practices viz. anticapitalist and anti-imperialist struggle, as well as aesthetic representations thereof.

Of course, there had been many writers and artist-activists who had mapped out the emergent post-WWII world-system and its imperialist logics, from Samir Amin and Immanuel Wallerstein to Frederic Jameson and David Harvey, from Manuel Castells to Saskia Sassen, from the Latin American dependency theorists to the Subaltern Studies group, to mention only a tiny handful. From the 1994 uprising of the Zapatistas to the Battle of Seattle, many North American poets followed the implications of these shifts as well, attempting to forge new poetics appropriate to the historical moment. Poets like Rodrigo Toscano, Juliana Spahr, Jeff Derksen, Myung Mi Kim, Mark Nowak, Heriberto Yépez, or Deborah Richards, as well as journals such as *XCP*, *West Coast Line*, *Chain*, *Tinfish*, and *Interlope*:

suddenly a new generation of poets, emerging in dialogue with previous generations of avant-garde, diasporic, and anticolonial poetics, was moving beyond increasingly provincial debates over nationalist poetics and identity, as well as a return of a conversational (and often apolitical) poetics of personality, to rethink and reframe what North American poetry could add to the cognitive mapping of and struggles within-and-against neoliberal globalization.

Translocal Montage

East / of what?

—Catalina Cariaga, “No Orient”

In “Excerpts from Bahala Na!” (*Cultural Evidence*, 1999), Catalina Cariaga splices together textual fragments from an advertising campaign for Singapore Airlines, a study of cockfighting, and various international news accounts of the case of Flor Contemplación, the Filipina migrant domestic worker executed in Singapore for murder. Throughout, there is the additional “voice” of international activists’ communication via the internet, attempting to gather information and organize around Contemplación’s case. Cariaga’s collaging of these various sources does more than merely place seemingly disparate discursive and rhetorical materials ‘in conversation’. The formal (dis)organization and rearticulation of her source texts makes manifest the violence of the poem’s subject matter, violence both physical and discursive. At the same time, by placing quotation marks around each fragment, she retains to some degree the sense of speech fragments ripped from their historical context, while at the level of reading (whether aloud or silently) producing a kind of halting, stuttering poetics that resists any smooth lyricism or, for that matter, any smoothing over of the parataxic clash of meanings:

“All around the world” “it put cockfighting on the map”
“required reading for folklorists” “please E-mail me”

“Singapore girl” “a vacuum cleaner and oven” “cooks”
“you’re a great way to fly” “armed with steel spurs”

“All around the world” “combat in a circular pit”
“100% cotton; extra starch” “please E-mail me”

The clash of phrases, rhetorics, and modes of address produce multiple readings that nonetheless accrete over the course of the poem into an affective rendering of local politics suddenly writ (and re-writ) global. “Singapore girl”—exotic flight attendant? migrant domestic worker?—“cooks” (as verb or noun or both?)—is (via the implied domestic laboring) “a great way to fly” yet is nonetheless “armed with steel spurs”—referencing both kitchenware as well as an implicit violence. A singular event—the case of Flor Contemplación—begins in one local (a site already overdetermined by the gendered shuttling between the Philippines and Singapore) and becomes, via the thick description of ethnographic and advertising discourses, connected laterally to the uneven machinations of globalization, while at the same time set into a more complex context wherein “you’re a great way to fly” can be read (against the cross-cultural grain) ethnographically, and “it put cockfighting on the map” as touristic advertising rhetoric.

“Singapore girl” “please E-mail me”
“All around the world” “please E-mail me”

The repetition of the phrase “please E-mail me” throughout the work functions at one level as a refrain or plaint, as well as interrupting any clean divide between public and private discourse (or frontchannel/backchannel). At the same time, any easy identification with the well-intentioned activist’s refrain—as a recognizable positionality vis-à-vis the “content” of the poem—becomes more difficult upon closer reading. The pairings within lines of (for instance):

“required reading for folklorists” “please E-mail me”

or:

“100% cotton; extra starch” “please E-mail me”

produce an interesting tension within the poem, problematizing the reader’s position. These lines mix a kind of advertising language, from book blurb to commodity boast, and then seem to invite the reader’s participation in what is clearly an ethnographic/commodity aesthetics. Thus the “please E-mail me” becomes both “please contact me (the poem) for what it promises/offers for consumption” and “please contact me (the reader) with more information/ethnographic data.” This suggestive framing of the ambivalence surrounding transnational activism and its subaltern ‘object’ prevents the poem from lapsing into an oversimplified tale of good (immigrant/native/activist) and bad (employer/ethnographer), as well as implicating writer, reader, and activist in the complex and often contradictory cultural politics at work in the poem.

“All around the world” “a domestic” “she” “was represented”
“with clemency, but this was rejected” “please E-mail me”

Here the transnational migrant laborer, “domestic” (both “local” and as gendered site/form of labor); in the poem (and in the press, in activist’s accounts, in anthropology, etc.) “she” “was represented” / “with clemency, but this was rejected...” The implied critique of ethnography throughout the poem questions representational practices, especially of the subaltern. The “please E-mail me” can then be read as an (exasperated? ironic?) request by the poem/author/reader/Western subject for subaltern speech/text — which, of course, can only be mediated via electronic communication (pre-Web 2.0, it should be noted), presuming a geographical (and thus geopolitical) distance — perhaps the *distance of representation itself*. Again, a concise staging of several problematics: of representation, subaltern speech (or the inability to ‘speak’, to invoke Spivak), gendered labor within transnational migrant economies, the

suggestive relation between the activist's plea and the juridical's rejection, all while retaining (within the broader canvass of the entire poem) the horizon of a nascent transnational feminism—"all around the world"—as well as articulating a specific historical event within developing translocal activisms and broader global contestations around gender, ethnicity, and commodification.

Scale Work

Sometime after the Seattle protests in 1999, Robert Fitterman gave a talk at Yedda's and my flat in San Francisco. Presenting his ideas on what he was then calling "inventory poetry"¹, he played a cassette tape that collaged different language sources, including Noam Chomsky giving a speech in New York wherein the word "Seattle" is repeated several times on the tape. Amidst linguistic detritus and tape hiss (as I recall it), a buzzword of the era's politics (however naïve in retrospect) was able to "make itself heard" through the din. Seattle had traveled from New York to San Francisco in a poem consisting of nothing but others' words (played on a stereo assembled in Asia, not surprisingly). Though the bulk of that evening's discussion was centered on the implications of appropriation for poetry (this was before many of these concepts had been theorized under the banner of conceptual writing), the (analog!) tape collage Fitterman played stuck with me as a something between a chance encounter and an overdetermined articulation of how new forms of composition might be able to embed and manifest the mutually intertwined politics of the global and the local. Indeed, Fitterman's poetry in this time would reflect this shift as well.

Fitterman's *Metropolis* is a multi-book serial poem, wherein many of the individual sections 'take place' in New York, where the author lives and works. However, in Fitterman's work, New York is not simply the local(e) of the poem's titular imaginary, but functions as a particular (and particularly fluid and dynamic) site of multiple discourses and scales. By "scales" I wish to invoke a notion of the simultaneous registers of both local and global networks of social, economic, and cultural relations, as well as the unevenness

of such relations as they manifest themselves in cultural politics. Further, the concept of scale refers not only to spatial realms of globalization but the related imaginaries necessary to render—discursively, aesthetically, cognitively—cartographies of globalization from a variety of sites and positions.

Metropolis 19—“Dream Cuisine: Neo-Colonialism, Nouvelle Cuisine, Lewis & Clark, and the Union Square Café” (1998)—constructs one such mapping, using source text from the journals of Lewis and Clark and the menu of New York’s Union Square Café to interrogate the celebratory discourses of both the “American frontier” and contemporary multicultural “ethnic cuisine”:

State of the cumin

glorious fusion yet
a tricky dance of cardamom and

Elk skins, I was obliged
to leave my celery root

coconut chutney of self-
discovery

Capt. C and myself concluded to set out early the next morning
and ascend these rivers until we could perfectly satisfy ourselves

Here the local dining experience in New York—“the cultural capitol of the world”—is re-scaled in several ways. The fusion of source materials in the poem provides an historical contextualization of the contemporary tourism of so-called global cuisine, as a journey of “self-discovery” that is perhaps more concerned with “perfectly satisfy[ing] ourselves” than in cross-cultural

exchange and dialogue. U.S. nationalism, while celebrating the melting pot (to invoke another cooking term) of cultural diversity, becomes as much about (literal) consumption as it does an encounter with living, dynamic cultures and traditions. Indeed, just as the references to both menu items and hunted game seem to equate non-Western cultural references with pre-conquest ‘cultural tradition’ (“cardamom and / Elk skins”), United States national identity (“the state of the cumin”) is at once a “glorious fusion yet / a tricky dance.”

The poem functions at a number of different sites and scales, from local to national to global, as well as traversing different kinds of cultural, economic, and discursive routes, from frontier exploration (its own form of imperial cartography) to the spice trade to the poetics of menus, replete with their own melting pot imaginaries (the “dream cuisine” of the poem’s title). At the same time, this is not a touristic poetics, or a clever traveler’s guide for globe-hopping cosmopolitans, but a rearticulation from a specific position, that of the global (neocolonial) city of New York. Here the subject is indeed a citizen of empire, offered the possibilities of consuming the global (or to be more specific, commodities delivered up by global capitalism) from within the confines of the local. However, the local and global can no longer remain separate, binary realms of experience or consciousness. As global consumer capitalism performs its own re-scaling on the site(s) of the local, the subject is interpolated as a citizen-subject of the global (or as a citizen-laborer, citizen-consumer, etc.). Where better exemplified is this than in New York, which is:

crowded with Islands;
Colorado lamb and

tangy salsa verde

[...]
social fabric,

croquetted wontons

sustaining the loss
of two very large bear skins

Not to strike those nations we had taken
by five hundred

dinners five nights a week

Though Fitterman is likely more known today for his post-conceptualist works, *Metropolis* captures his transition from a Reznikoff-ian documentary poetics to a full-scale mixologist (especially in *Metropolis XXX*). Though much of his current work is highly attuned to how contemporary culture becomes ‘flattened’ in online space (in turn revealing new modes of affective depth and mediated subjectivity), here the drop-down menu has an IRL materiality directly linked to global trade, consumption and the exotic, and the geo-historical mapping is served up in a delicious stew that remains an exemplary model of how appropriation and collage can perform scale work well beyond the individual or avatar.

Bringing the Global Home

over the table — mergers
across the mesa — maquilas
—Hung Q. Tu

The cover of Hung Q. Tu’s *Verisimilitude* (Atelos, 2000) contains US Dept. of Defense photos of soldiers in Vietnam, with the names of American cities printed over them, referencing the strategy of “bringing the war home,” a component in the ideological struggles of the US anti-war movement. In *Verisimilitude*, Tu brings the neoliberal ideological wars “home,” rearticulating

the global at the level of the local and rewriting the subjective against the terrain of transnational shifts in political economy and (im)migrancy.

Hong Kong — South Central
material — material
freighter — freight

China Embraces Liberalism!
consequences live in neighborhoods
but since this is literature
I'm interested in the term FOB

— from “Uneven Development, Uneven Poetics”

The title of this poem in particular suggests a broader poetics in response to (and/or symptom of?) uneven development, at once both socio-economic as well as *global* in its scope. Uneven development, conceptualized in numerous Marxian domains from cultural geography to dependency theory, projects the capitalist world-system as its horizon, as well as its cause. ‘Uneven Poetics,’ in this context, might suggest a notion of literary practice and reading that would decenter Euro-American modernisms (or at least reframe them within a structurally uneven global system of production, distribution, and imperial imaginaries), as well as begin to explore a ‘global poesis’ within the form of the poetic itself. Thus the contradictions and disjunctures within such poems are not merely aesthetic elements for the sake of upsetting conventional notions of cohesion or gestures intended to stand for ‘innovation’, but rather fundamental to a rendering of the contradictions within global capitalism itself, wherein uneven development is both a byproduct and a necessity. Rather than attempting to read (and recuperate) such poems within dominant Euro-American notions of modernist and postmodernist values (where, for instance, there continues to be an implied—and also at times explicit—hierarchy between “Poetry”, celebrated for formal innovation and

‘universal’ [ie, Western] liberal values and [insert identity category here]-poetry, read for content presumed to reveal ‘messages *about*’ the author or [identity-category] experience), perhaps we might recognize how new formal strategies can break such problematic divides and better represent the ‘actuality’ of the contemporary, without erasing the particularities of those bodies and subjectivities (such as Flor Contemplación’s), for whom globalization can be a curse as much as a breaking down of rigid borders and categories.

I don’t want to invest too much in the title of Tu’s poem, which I imagine is at least partially ironic, but I do think it is nonetheless a provocative (and productive) invitation to read his work within a broader global socio-economic nexus. Likewise, I don’t wish to imply that his poetry is solely a one-to-one representation of “uneven development” (or global capital) itself, but rather suggest a possible reading that allows for the formal elements of Tu’s work to be read alongside the content as two (separate but linked) kinds of articulations of the global. If “the poem,” circulating within networks of distribution, interpretation, and lit-crit discourses, might be said to constitute a kind of “local site,” then Tu’s work exemplifies an ongoing dialectical remapping of various kinds of articulated locals within the contested spaces of the global. Again, local and global are not two separate domains, each occupying a coherent discursive space. Rather, many (uneven) locals and positionalities—including the contested site of the transnational subject, which in Tu’s work is often the Vietnamese immigrant service worker or the itinerant tech worker imbricated in the expanding and uneven ‘worldwide webs’ of culture (the ‘global cuisine’ of digital consumption?)—are brought into a contradictory and uneven spatiality of poetic form, from the local/personal to the global—

rent —
since rent
gained (historical) ballast

giddy up horsy giddy up
you, me, and the land mass of Brazil

(“It’s Just Your Basic CYA [The Streets of San Francisco])”

—or from global to local/subjective, effect to affect:

 wherever a beach
In Bali the din that is
Tin to mistake
The stock from the
Company or that
From the product
Or that from your
Self or that from
Benevolence or that
From justifiable or
That from homicide

(“The Birth of Cool (Cash)”)

In Tu’s work such poetry does not use a prefab form or genre (the ‘immigrant narrative’ or the ‘identity poem’) simply remodeled to address global/local economic issues, but a working-through of those issues in both content and form: the lived daily processing (in language) of various locals (from self to jobsite to state to national to transnational identity) within and against the backdrop of the global (even as that ‘backdrop’ is neither ‘over there’ nor some thematic of exotic cosmopolitanism).

last word
global village
global idiocy
logic of conservation posture of farce

stake out strategic ground figure any hill
chatter over “maintaining lifestyles”
rent raised history soon to compensate

copies! copies! copies!
transfix a hovering rim that trade
vessels plot by stars then
radar’s iridescence as construed providence
indivisible term only magnets see
being *on behalf end in good faith*
supplier/supplied — suffixes hardly do justice

aversion
the authentic
restaurant heir
embargoes namesake
gripped a tables turning
paid underneath *un der* towed
compradorship by example

potential
clerks clergy
for their convenience
or *by the grace of god*
b sub-altern to b
autopsy on the text reveals
the body’s captive language

(from *A Great Ravine*, [Parenthesis, 1997])

Here we can see a compelling distillation of immigrant identity and its linguistic representation worked through the grinders of labor, production and global trade. The language of global capital ends up literally inscribed on the body, while its rearticulation (through laboring immigrant bodies) becomes the poem, whose “last word[s]” provide “the autopsy on the text.” The “body’s captive language”—named worker, renter, “FOB,” clerk (“copies! copies! copies!”: shade of a Bartleby in the age of digital reproduction?), coroner, poet—shows how subaltern(ized) bodies re-articulate identity, but without any easy coherence or “maintaining lifestyles,” even while increasingly subsumed into the global economy and its racialized logics (“always already race bait” he writes in *Verisimilitude*). As Tu puts it in “Market Psychology and Economic Fundamentals in a *Times* Article on the Straits”:

la differance — accountant’s *raison d’être*

world-view around the clock

As in Cariaga and Fitterman’s work in the late 90s, Tu’s is yet another example of how, against the increasingly tired and over-simplified discourses (both neoliberal and leftist-theoretical) about and around ‘globalization,’ a radical and avant-garde poetics might continue to chart fissures and fractures in neoliberal capitalism while also forging an internationalist outlook for living in a world of our laboring but not of our making.

¹ cf of the special issue of *Object* on inventory that Fitterman edited around that time, as well as his discussion with Bruce Andrews on the concept in *Tripwire* 4.