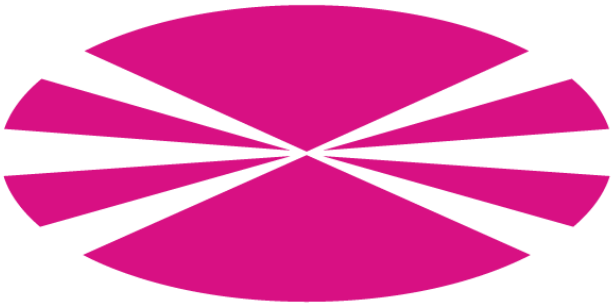

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"To Be a Yardstick":

Individual Rebellion and Social Conformity

in Cathy Park Hong's *Engine Empire*

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“I rebel – therefore we exist”

Albert Camus

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Abstract

This Master's thesis engages in a multidisciplinary humanistic analysis of Cathy Park Hong's triptych *Engine Empire*. Said analysis is divided into three parts, each one corresponding to one of the poem's sections. Following Sigmund Freud's anthropological ideas on the origin and development of civilization, every chapter deals with the struggles of individuals who refuse to abide by the social norms imposed on them. Freud's theory is complemented with the works of Michel Foucault regarding the means by which the ruling power exerts control over its subjects. Together with the analysis of the poem proper, the aim of this paper is to show how a literary work, namely a work of poetry, can elicit critical thinking.

Introduction

"The liberty of the individuals is not a benefit of culture"

Sigmund Freud

In his 1930's classic *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud unveils how the perks of a civilized life take a heavy toll on individual freedom. Much in the vein of most accounts of the meaning of human existence, Freud claims that an individual's ultimate aspiration is to achieve happiness. According to the Austrian author, this can be accomplished either by avoiding pain and discomfort or through the satisfaction of instinctual urges. Only the latter can be called happiness proper and it is hardly attainable. To our chagrin, "It is much less difficult to be unhappy" (Freud 22). Sources of discomfort haunt us threefold: through our own decaying body, the cruel outer world and, most poignantly, other people (34). Nonetheless, Freud avers that there is an unrestrained impulse in humans to bond and build communities, since before horizons of suffering the individual is "wont to reduce its demands for happiness" (23). The rewards reaped are society's most cherished accomplishments: from hygiene to the judicial system, through poetry and outer space exploration. Ultimately, claims Freud, humans yield before the dread of not being loved.

This love for the other may be vested interest or self-forgetting infatuation, but it indefectibly carries along the comforting reassurance of communal protection. Then, what about those who reject or are simply unable to take in societal gifts? What is their relation to the others and to the order-providing state? What does fate save for those who refuse to turn in their individual freedom? Cathy Park Hong's *Engine Empire* (2012) explores the

lives of such characters against a backdrop of rising empires throughout centuries and an enmeshment of real, fictional and virtual locations. In this paper, I will trace those lives in order to bring to the fore their existential pathos and show the social and psychological consequences of their rebellion[1].

In spite of its being a poetry book, *Engine Empire* is intentionally narrative. Its pages run throughout the past two centuries and beyond; from the "silt sand" of Californian river banks in the past, to the Chinese boom towns of our present, and back to the western valleys, earthly home to our virtual future. The book's three sections present a clearly discernible main character whose story develops as a structure to which the rest of the poems in each part may be said to be ancillary. This is not to say those secondary poems are mere *attrezzo*, for they introduce rich characters themselves and are essential to the building up of Hong's fictional worlds. Furthermore, the book's triple division allows for the parallel description of the three stages in the development of individuals and civilizations that I pursue in this paper, following Freud's theories and expanding them with those of Michel Foucault, Éric Sadin and Byung-Chul Han, among others.

Regarding individuals, Freud's definitive scheme of the human psyche can be understood as the interrelation between three institutions: the Id, the Ego and the Super-ego. Succinctly, the Id can be said to be everything that is unconscious in our minds; whereas consciousness is the main characteristic of the Ego. The Super-ego represents the internalization of the moral law, and works as the policing agent that keeps the Ego at bay. When the former's demands are too strict, the latter collapses into neurosis. As for civilizations, culture is to Freud "the sum of the achievements and institutions which

[1] Camus defines the rebel as the individual who says "no", and whose no "affirms the existence of a [moral] borderline" (13). This is so because "every act of rebellion tacitly invokes a value" (ibid.)

differentiate our lives from those of our animal forebears" (39). Cultural development in a civilization can be measured through accomplishments such as the domination of nature, the recreation in the useless, hygiene standards or order. Finally, Freud suggests that the "cultural process in humanity" is similar to "the process of development or upbringing in an individual human being" (106). I claim in this paper that such developments can be traced in Hong's fictional characters and their communities, since *Engine Empire* offers the everlasting battle between the individual and the community they inhabit[2].

In keeping with the poem's structure, I have sought in this essay to offer the kind of analysis that better suits each of its parts. Therefore, the authors cited in each chapter are chosen inasmuch as they provide the appropriate conceptual tools to unravel the philosophical depth of Hong's work. While Freud's anthropological ideas on civilizations run throughout the paper, Michel Foucault's concepts of bio-power and bio-politics, which imply the idea that in modern societies punishment on the body is turned inwards so as to become a means of political dominance, finds their own development in the essay. Due to his early death, Foucault did not have the opportunity to adapt his theories to a world that has become deeply intertwined with ICTs. Hence, Han's concept of psychopolitics is presented in the third chapter as the expansion of Foucault's theories.

In chapter one, "The Desperado Ego," I suggest that an example of a primeval civilization can be found in the coarse and violent association of the band of outlaws who are the protagonists of the first section of the poem, "Ballad of Our Jim". Focus is drawn on one of the bandits, Jim, who embodies the ego-driven individual that has no place in a more developed civilization. In fact, the character of Jim stands for a double rebellion: on the one

[2] Although style guides tend to proscribe it, I will use in this paper the pronoun "they" in accordance to gender-neutrality.

hand, he is a member of the gang which as a whole represents the rejection of progress; on the other, he also rebels against the band itself, which leads to his fatal denouement.

Chapter two, “The Super-ego in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, showcases the internalization of punishment, as social anxiety becomes full grown consciousness of guilt. According to my reading, at this stage in Freud’s theory, the super-ego has been introjected. The individual in “Shangdu, My Artful Boomtown!” is represented by a number of anonymous characters who struggle to make a living in the booming fictional city of Shangdu. Migrant farmers, factory workers and business moguls are all part of the landscape. Individuality starts to blur in this section, where people become disposable and replaceable.

In chapter three, “The Hijacked Id”, I contend that Hong’s version of the future is not far from our current reality. In “The World Cloud”, *Engine Empire*’s foray into the future, the ruling power becomes invisible as humanity transcends into a virtual state, the consequences of which we are yet to discover. Moreover, this final chapter suggests *Engine Empire*’s epilogue, “The Fable of the Last Untouched Town” as a confirmation of Freud’s fears regarding an abandonment of civilization, since it arguably portrays a world after the final insurgent manages to fulfill her rebellion, a world that has receded into barbarity.

Finally, while this essay is a socio-anthropological approach to a poem, another purpose lies beneath its surface. At face value, the paper is set to draw a parallel between the events and characters in a poem and the development of individuals and societies from a Freudian point of view. The highlighted aspects are only a few of the myriad thought-provoking themes this long work touches upon. But this is precisely the covert intention of the essay as a whole: to show how poetry can be a means to elicit critical thought. Of course, *Engine Empire* can be regarded simply as a playful, albeit complex, piece of poetry. While reading

it, one can enjoy Hong's dexterity as a poet, get challengingly lost in its multiple times and places, and be amused by its witty sense of humor. Should the reader be up to the task, the book offers the opportunity to transcend the aesthetic into the more committed field of the political arena[3]. After all, as Danielle Pafunda suggests, Hong "builds strange worlds so that we might apprehend our real-world fissures" (205).

[3] Hong expressly claims this goal for poetry in a scathing article aimed at Kenneth Goldsmith, where she states that "The era of Conceptual Poetry's ahistorical nihilism is over and we have entered a new era, the poetry of social engagement" ("There's a New Movement in American Poetry and It's Not KG")

I. "Ballad of Our Jim" or The Desperado Ego

Structured as a *mise en abyme* which holds ballads within ballads, the first section of Hong's book recounts the uncivil story of a band of debauched outlaws who travel west drawn by the promise of wealth waiting to be sieved from gritty river banks. On their way towards the Pacific, they encounter myriad characters that provide the poems with a robust Far West background, but mostly bespeak brutality and death. Not without a sense of humor, Hong revisits western clichés in a fictional story of human greed and violence set in the rising American empire of the 19th century. Formally, these pieces resemble sonnets in that they are structured in quatrains; however, their strength lies in the author's ability to play with words and twist the language. During its composition, Hong resorted to old west dictionaries, but also created new words of authentic cowboy feel. Alliteration is everywhere and the continuous use of nouns and adjectives as verbs transmits a sense of solidity that is characteristic of the first section of the book, where the body and raw materials are salient. The main characters in this part do not give up on their desires and are painfully driven by their instincts and obsessions. From gold diggers to ruthless killers, "Ballad of Our Jim" is a clear example of both primeval egos and civilizations. Whereas Jim, the protagonist, embodies the consequences of the forfeiture of the "[u]nbridled gratification of all desires" (22), the wider context of the rise of the American empire stands for the social equivalent of Jim's introjections of the super-ego.

I.I. All in the family

"Ballad of Our Jim" begins with the mention of the "duel" the "whole country is in" (19/1)[4], thus setting its time and place, i.e. civil war America. The protagonists to be, however, claim that they "want no part of it" (19/1). Thus, from the start Hong makes it clear that her interest lies in the individuals who live on the margins of the empires the book's title anticipates. Margins, or frontiers, are another salient aspect of Hong's poem. In fact, the author conceives "the frontier as being on the borders of language, body, and land" ("Engine Empire by Elsbeth Pancrazi"). Together with the conquest of the American west, the book explores the limits of capitalist growth and that new final frontier that is the virtual world. This interest is here most evident as the conversation occurs literally on the margin of the page, the statements preceded by bare colons:

> They see us ride, they say
> :all you men going the wrong di-rection.
> :We're getting to California. We ain't got time to enlist[5].

The men are neither pacifists nor deserters. With boomtowns beckoning them from beyond the horizon, they ride covetous of "precious ore" (19/13) towards California, a prospector's dream destination, "through fields of blue rye and plains" (19/11). Hong's characters sing

[4] Since *Engine Empire* is a fairly lengthy poem, and in order to make quotations easier to find for the reader, I have decided to reference the page number followed by the poem's line(s). In the case of prose poems, I only reference the page number.
[5] The narrative voice, hence, is taken up by one of the anonymous riders, who traces the first us/them division of which there will be many throughout this first part of the book.

of a land to be seized and exploited; their desire is egoist, individualist[6]. These are men who ride together for the sake of protection, and their bond is one based on common interest. Of such associations Freud warns us that, with men, "Their interests in their common work would not hold them together; the passions of instinct are stronger than reasoned interests" (70). The weaker the society, the less strong its ties are.

Jim's first appearance attests to the violent, harsh bonding in *Engine Empire*'s first part. "Ballad of Fort Mann" brings the band of brothers to the stockade of an abandoned fort. At its gates, some boys hold the men at gunpoint, struggling with rifles "much too big for them" (20/6-7); adult men are gone, "they at war" (20/9). Having lost a member of the gang to the hands of a pelter, the men lure one of the children out with "hen fruit and fresh violet marrow" (20/12) – which suggests children are starving –, and trap him. The wild boy, a brother now, is christened Jim. As the ballad goes, there is something odd about Jim, for "all he does is sing" (20/14) about sickness and death. However ominous, Jim remains with the brothers and will eventually become the main character in the remaining ballads. In a way, the kidnapping of Jim present humans as another element to be seized, just as cattle, gold or land.

The story of his origins, as told in "Ballad of Infanticide", delves deeper into the horrors of a lawless life. In this piece, the brothers have entered a teetotaler settlement by force, and are listening to one of Jim's songs about an Indian killer that sequesters a Comanche woman who serves him as a guide. As the story goes, the ranger and the woman have one child, and she "is ramped / with another" (21/7-8) when the man leaves off with a "fair-haired sheriff's daughter" (21/9). Mercilessly, the mother and her two sons are then

[6] In his classic *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), Fredrick Jackson Turner posited pioneering as the key element in the forging of American character. If Jackson Turner's famous frontier thesis is right, Hong's rebels are paradoxically, in their egoism, contributing to the empire's rise.

banished from the community. But the woman seeks revenge, poisons the sheriff's daughter and brutally murders her own newborn baby while the other son manages to escape. "Enough of this devil song" (21/17), beg some of the besieged women. All eyes turn to Jim, and the men finally realize "our Jim's a two-bit half-breed" (21/19). As it turns out, he is the one who got away.

Jim's tragic story portrays both sides of one of Freud's two founding principles of civilization: "the power of love" (52). The problem with it is that it makes individuals "to a very dangerous degree dependent on a part of the outer world, namely, on [their] chosen love-object" (55). Losing the object due to death or rejection generates the "most painful sufferings" (ibid.). Aim-inhibited love, or affection, is the development of that very same sensual one, albeit directed at the family and friends. It is through affection that societies are built. Jim's mother's heinous deeds can be understood when we realize she has been left without any form of love. Banishing her from the community was basically her death sentence, since there was no chance for an Indian woman to return to her home once it had born a white man's children. On the other hand, it is the second of Freud's founding principle of civilized life which saves Jim from squalor: "the compulsion to work, created by external necessity" (52). The brothers sequester him because one of them had perished. In Freud's scheme, an association of outlaws could be regarded as the most basic form of civilization. These sort of primitive associations abound in the book's first part and Hong depicts the troubled relations that they have with one another, and with the state, as we shall see in the following sections.

I.II. Love Thy Neighbor

Freud suggests that the expansion of affection "towards an all-embracing love of others and of the world at large" is considered to be the highest "state of mind of which man is capable" (56). In his opinion, however, this is really neither desirable nor possible. Together with Eros' thrust runs a destructive force, the death instinct. Thus, in human beings, aggressive tendencies are "an innate, independent, instinctual disposition" (82). Freud finds in the age-old command to love our neighbors "the strongest defence there is against human aggressiveness" (111). Painfully, "The command is impossible to fulfill" (ibid.). Freud's fears are confirmed in the bloody intergroup encounters that take place in "Ballad of Our Jim."

Intercultural conflict adopts many forms in the book. Most of the smaller groups that interact with the brothers share similar patterns of action, be it native tribes, Chinese immigrants or French trailers. However, bitter contempt is shown for one another due to what Freud calls "narcissism in respect of minor differences" (73). Basically, it points to the fact that minor discrepancies are regarded as core differences which allow the members of one group to despise or ridicule the members of the other. According to Freud, this can be seen as a "form of satisfaction for aggressive tendencies" (73), which, in turn, creates stronger ties between the members of the group. Unsurprisingly, such behavior proves to be disastrous.

The "Ballad of Burial Rites and the Effigy of Vengeance" shows an example of how "the aggressive instinct can find an outlet in enmity towards those outside the group" (Freud 73). In this piece, the chief of an Indian tribe has died and his body is being mourned in a parade. The brothers are drunk, "banged up on bug juice" (32/8), and mock

the bereaved; one of them going as far as pushing the cart where the chief lies, causing his dead body to land on the ground. The following morning, the riders find the corpse of their brother hanging "like a sheet of meat" (32/13). In **"**Ballad of the Occasional Indian Disturbance," Jim kills a Miwok who had tried to steal the group's mules. Death and barbarity show up in Greek tragedy fashion, as the corpse of the man is dragged around, vultures "peck him raw" (24/3) and his sister, an aboriginal Antigone, follows the group, asking for her brother's body in order to properly mourn him. Upon her insistence, the men "take her hard" (24/9). Awake again, she wails until one of them, "tired of her yammering" (24/11), unties her brother's defiled body. This episode shows how the feeble young Jim becomes a cold-blooded killer. Not only does he shoot the Indian and take part in the gruesome parade, but he also admonishes his brothers for showing mercy[7].

In "Ballad of Other Folk", more trailers reach the town where the men have settled. They are described as "cowpokes and canvas-wagoned / Easterners" (30/1-2), but also as "Mexicans and deacon-sized Chinamen" (30/7). Ethno-racial problems sprout as "one Chinaman gets knifed for being what he is" (31/9). Another strikes gold, boasts about it mockingly and follows the path of his fellow countryman. In "Ballad of the Rube Parade with Their Quiver of Spades"**,** the riders are playing cards one night with some Frenchmen and the game turns into a "pistolfire brawl" (31/8). One of the brothers gets murdered and the others call for Jim, who had been watching silently from afar, to kill the enemy. Dutifully, he does so. The men's celebration is tarnished by Jim's gloomy statement: "I'm done finishing your games" (31/14).

As suggested earlier, although the brothers, the French and the Chinese share similar lives and objectives, their group narcissisms put one against the other. Thus, all these

[7] Incidentally, this marks the beginning of the conflict between Jim and the brothers.

poems perfectly reflect Freud's words when he claims that aggressiveness "constitutes the most powerful obstacle to culture" (82). In order to surmount such an obstacle, the appearance of the Law is necessary.

I.III. In the Name of the Law

The presence of justice in the first section reflects the transitional context in which the story is set. The country immersed in a fratricide battle, neither of the two warring sides appears to care about what goes on in the frontier. Hence, the kind of reigning justice found is the one that takes the name precisely from this historical moment: frontier justice. In "Mob Ballad", a "rouge-doused banker in a stovepipe hat" (22/8) is made to walk the plank, or more precisely a "horsehair tightrope tied from one barrack to another" (22/6). The banker only manages to tread once before falling over, amidst a shower of bullets fired to unbalance him. He falls hard on the floor and all is heard is "the thud, his silence" (22/14). We are not told what the banker's crime was, but this is not the matter, since what Hong is trying to transmit is the latent desire for death. A similar scene can be found in the "Ballad of Rites Inside a Rookery of Avarice", where the men reach a fortification inhabited by religious men and women, former "whores they cured" (23/2). They use improvised pulpits to sentence a thief to the rope and the women "have a fandango" (23/5) to celebrate it.

Hence, all groups seem to abide by the *lex talionis*. However, in "Ballad of the Unbidding", things change, as something is going on inside Jim's head. He becomes speechless, although a latent violence can be read on his semblance and some "ursine beast from tarnation / is holed up" (33/3-4) in him. He kills a number of retired sheriffs who

wander through boomtowns also searching their luck. Unaware of their fate, they, as others, keep on coming to meet their deaths. Jim's killings do not cease until eventually, in "Ballad of a Showdown", he picks off a "high grass constable" (34/1) sent by the government to bring peace to those lands. The story reaches central government and "a mighty / bounty" (34/3-4) is finally put on Jim's head.

The importance of the appearance of the Law is twofold. On the one hand, it symbolizes the internalization of the super-ego. The consequences of this will show in Jim's change of attitude, as we shall see. On the other, pertaining civilization, Freud claims that "[t]he first requisite of culture … is justice; that is, the assurance that a law once made will not be broken in favour of any individual" (46). Until crime actually interferes in the way of the central government, people are, by and large, left to their own affairs. Lacking a higher hierarchical figure of authority, all the different communities in this section of the book resort to mob trials or simple and pure revenge to make others pay for their crimes: Jim kills a mule robber, Indians flay and hang one of the brothers, and the town mob lynches the banker. Therefore, according to my reading, the bounty put on Jim is a symbol of the merging point of the old ways and the new ones which are in the making.

This interplay of violence and justice in this part of the book perfectly exemplifies the transition in the internalization of punishment in a Foucauldian sense. In his *Discipline and Punish* (1985), Michel Foucault traces the history of judicial punishment from the early 18th century and the death throes of torture to the all-pervasive surveillance of modern societies in the form of asylums, factories, hospitals and schools. In pre-modern times, there was power as a commodity in the hands of a monarch, who exercised punishment on the body of its subject. In contrast, Foucault presents two different but overlapped forms of modern power. Disciplinary power aims to forge a "docile body that may be subjected, used,

transformed and improved" (*Discipline* 198) Running along with disciplinary power is bio-power, which designates "what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life" (*Sexuality* 143). That is, bio-power works similarly to disciplinary power, but whereas the latter affects the individual, the former is applied to "the behaviours and subjective identities of whole populations" (Layder 109). In other words, in modernity the tortured body is substituted with the tortured mind.[8] Those caught up at the turn of an era must pay a double price.

I.IV. The Bandit-Prophet

The three poems that bring the first section to an end deal with Jim's ambiguous regained freedom and the impossibility of redemption. "The Testimonial of the Last Brother" narrates the plot of the treacherous men who confabulate to hand Jim to the authorities in exchange for the bounty put on his head. As one may have expected, Jim hears them come, takes their guns in a struggle and shoots one of the men in the head before he is able to finish his cynical plea: "Why Jim we adopted-" (35/18). The remaining brother closes his eyes and prepares to die. To his own wonder, Jim spares him, and when he opens his eyes, Jim is "gone" (35/22). This is the last we learn of the brothers, all of

[8] The lack of a monarch or a totalitarian government in mid 19th century America impeded the possibility of a full enforcement of power in the pre-modern sense. By the same token, the country's only being on the outset of its becoming a modern state did not allow for a discipline society to soar yet. Eventually, the monopoly of violence changes from the hands of angry individuals to the armed forces of a totalitarian state as described in the second section, and becomes imperceptible in the third. Thus, together with the unfolding of individuals and civilizations, the development of that which binds them, i.e. law and justice, also runs throughout *Engine Empire*.

whom but one find only death, and no gold. From here on, the ballads focus only on Jim as he trails alone.

In "Ballad in I"[9], Jim is shown roaming around the old boomtown, getting tired of "picking fights, swinging fists, / slitting twitching skin in livid fits" (36/5-6). Jim becomes morose, "his grim instinct wilting" (36/13), and eventually leaves town, "sighing in this tilting / sinking light" (36/15-16). Jim's giving up violence hints at the fact that although he was able to fend off the law in the form of the sheriff, the more stringent law of the super-ego finally takes over him. The point could be made here that once Jim is free from his "captor family", his real nature shows, as in a Rousseaunian plot twist. Once again an orphan, perhaps his true self might find its place in another community.

We last hear of Jim in "The Song of Katydids". Roaming the open fields, he finds a swarm of crickets, "a rogue insectile rug is the land" (37/8). Amidst the swarm he makes out a girl who is trying to drive the insects away from her crops. No longer a child, Jim feels lust, perhaps love: "¡Te quiero!" (37/16), he shouts at her. The young girl appears here as an element of hope regarding Jim's integration in a community. As the katydids fly to him and surround him, he is being symbolically welcomed into an ordered society. Alas, the girl's mother recognizes him as the wanted criminal he is and drags her daughter into the house. Jim acknowledges that forever he will have to face other people and their "bedlamite mouths" (28). As his mother before him, he is deprived of love and affection. Thus, in the blink of an eye the grasshoppers fly away, "leaving Jim be, / go in the denuded

[9] Mostly in this part of the book, Hong resorts to experimental techniques reminiscent of Oulipian poetry, where restrictions were put on composition. Whereas in "Abecedarian Western" each word at the beginning of all twenty-six lines each correspond to a letter in the alphabet, ordered from a to z, in "Ballad in I" all the words in the piece present the vowel in the title. This resource, which can be seen as a twist on *La Disparition*, a novel by George Perec where the letter "e" is never used, is employed by Hong in two other poems, "Ballad in A" and "Ballad in O". In this one, the play on words is more meaningful, since the "I" in the title also points to Jim's being finally alone.

earth" (31-32). As a bandit-prophet of sorts, Jim succumbs to the overwhelming clash of his instincts with the rising social impositions, and symbolically dies for the sins of all of our primeval egos.

The first part of the book closes, thus, with the symbolic defeat of the unbridled ego. All characters who give their impulses leeway end up raising daisies. In the book's next part, "Shangdu, my Artful Boomtown!," trails become highways, sod houses rise to skyscrapers, and river banks grow factories; the individual gives way to the citizen, the Law becomes internalized and anxiety mutates into guilt: it is the time of the super-ego, it is our time.

II. “Shangdu, My Artful Boomtown!”, or the Super-ego in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Set in a different continent and culture, and describing events happening more than a century later, the second section of the book seems at first to break completely with the previous one. Furthermore, ballads are gone and Hong turns to either free verse or prose, save for the last piece, which is a sonnet. From a thematic point of view, however, the struggle against oneself, the others and the outer world are again the poems’ core interests, laid out against the backdrop of a new rising empire: present-day China. If in “Ballad of Our Jim” the band of brothers pays no heed to a watershed moment in America’s history on their quest fueled by personal greed, the poems in “Shangdu, my Artful Boomtown!” provide a subjective view of individuals who would otherwise go unnoticed within the wider frame of the massive economic and political changes that the country is undergoing.

Whereas in the first section the characters were linked by a common goal, this one introduces a different kind of brotherhood, one that encompasses every individual, thus creating a nation-wide siblinghood. Some pieces, nonetheless, are written as a correspondence between a brother and a sister proper. The former has left their hometown and his sibling fills him in on the events back home, until she eventually decides to follow his steps. The remaining poems take the reader on a trip through a boomtown called Shangdu – a fictional twin to real-life Shenzhen – as seen and felt mostly by the sibling, who takes up the poetic voice. As is the case with the first section, in this second one Hong mixes the main arcs – the band of brothers, the siblings – with other poems which help to build the context.

In this chapter, the Freudian analysis I have been developing needs to be complemented with Michel Foucault's idea of the discipline society. On the one hand, the pieces in the second part of *Engine Empire* reflect a new stage both in the intricacy of sociopolitical relationships and in the psychological life of individuals. The development of smaller communities into larger social groupings such as current metropolises demands the appearance of the cultural super-ego which, "just like that of an individual, sets up high ideals and standards," and further implies "that failure to fulfill them is punished by both with anxiety of conscience" (Freud 109). On the other, this new psycho-social stage finds its historical equivalent in Foucault's discipline society, where the individual "is no longer called upon as a subject to obey the law but is produced instead as an individual who is required to conform to the *norm*" (Schrift 145). While in the first part of the book characters found in their equals the main obstacle for the satisfaction of their desires, in this one the ego is deterred not only by other people, but by both social norms and an oppressive government. Challenging them will prove as painful to the soul as a bullet to the body.

II.I. Transitions

"Shangdu" begins with a section titled "The Year of the Pig", which serves as a transition between the first and the second part of the book, as it provides examples of Chinese peasants' hurdles resembling the ones faced by the characters in the first part. The following piece, "Aubade", also works as symbolic transition, but within this part of the

book[10]. The poem itself is clearly divided into two parts. Lines one to eleven still recount the hardworking days of a feudal-like community. The land is hard and dry, her tools rudimentary; from the "morose miles of moor" (5/44) no plants grow, "just midges / to torment my ox" (7-8/44). Significantly, an element of great importance in the countryside, the ox, is presented as useless. In fact, the animal is literally sacrificed, thus pointing to a serious commitment to break with the past. Ties severed, the sibling claims "I am ready" (11/44).

The second part of the poem is a synesthetic foray into the awaking metropolis. Hong dexterously manages to present the reader with vivid images and even smells only through her description of urban sounds. One can practically see the brownish bodies of the crickets, be blinded by the "welder's firecrack" (17/44) and seduced by the sweet smell of fusing metal. However, here the insects are "in their cage" (13/44), and deafening "juddering slam of hammering jack" (15/44) contrasts with the unyielding ox. Factory workers are called to their posts by a "bassooning fog horn honing" (20/44), while the very product of the unending toil is put in question. Farmlands have been swapped for factories, but nothing edible comes from them; only a barrage of ludicrous consumer objects like plastic monkey dolls. The clinks of their tiny cymbals celebrate the travesty. The last line of the poem sardonically announces the change of eras: "Hail the Industrial Age, Hail!" (24/44).

Interestingly, until the poetic voice arrives in Shangdu, the pronoun "I" is used twice, whereas once the sister is finally in the city, the "I" seems to vanish. Below the effective poetic beauty of the scene underlies the idea of the loss of individuality. Freud called this

[10] Incidentally, an aubade is a song dedicated to lovers who must part ways at the crack of day. What is separated in this poem is a person from their land. Arguably, the person is the sibling, who has finally left her hometown.

"*la misère psychologique* of groups", that is, the effect caused by rigid forces of cohesion consisting "predominantly of identifications of the individuals in the group with one another" (75), thus preventing the possibility of the rise of strong individual personalities. This, of course, is not irrelevant in the context of a communist country[11]. What is interesting about present day China is its unique mixture of capitalism and socialism. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek somewhere suggests that this phenomenon marks the unthought-of end of the pair capitalism/democracy, and he forebodes a new ruling system for the future: totalitarian capitalism (Fowler et al.). The awakening and consequences of such a system can be found in the streets and peoples of Shangdu.

II.II. They Love Me Not

In the part titled "Adventures in Shangdu", the reader is taken into the city streets proper. In "Of Lucky Highrise Apartment 88", the sibling has moved into an unfinished block of buildings, the consequence of urban speculation. From her wall-less dwelling she can see and be seen. Across the river stand the factories, whose "hum … can inspire you or drive you mad" (46). The latter seems to be the case with two neighbors who commit suicide, the only reaction to this gruesome event being that "now there are ads for new roommates" (ibid.). In this new setting, the sibling lives alone in her apartment since her "last roommate married as quickly as she moved in" (ibid.). Thus, this poem introduces two salient issues which reflect Foucault's ideas on the means by which disciplinary societies run: on the one hand, convenience marriages as an example of how "Between the state and

[11] In *Civilization*, Freud explicitly states that the happiness lost in favor of social bonding cannot be retrieved following Marx's teachings. Winning back the means of production will not suffice to bring bliss to the individual (71).

the individual, sex became an issue" (*Sexuality* 26); and – from a Freudian perspective – of the forfeiture of a fundamental source of happiness, i.e. love. On the other, it showcases the mechanisms by which individuals become "'docile bodies'" (*Discipline* 138). The theme of love and marriage is present in ten of the seventeen pieces in this section. In her anthropological study of queer women in urban China, Elisabeth Engebretsen highlights "the continued primacy put on marriage and the pressures that young women and men, regardless of sexuality, continue to face in this regard" (19). In "Of Lucky Highrise Apartment 88's Courtyard or Epithalamion"[12] gawking strangers arrive at the wedding of a "young fresh-scrubbed boy of 20" and an "old haggard widow" (46). The onlookers do not approve of the ceremony and they interrupt it, showering the couple not with rice "but spit" (ibid.). In spite of their scornful demeanor, the crowd is described as "wistful" (ibid.), indicating a repressed longing for precisely that which they are mocking. It is this kind of social pressure against which the second part's characters rebel.

A clear indicator of both the relevance of marriage and the "commodification" of people can be found in "Of the Express Bus Route to the Capital", where the sibling admits to having tried a dating service agency, but leaving "once the woman began adding up my worth on a calculator" (50). Before the possibility of being handled as a product, the sibling decides to remain single. Whereas in the West such individual choices may be taken for granted, this is not the case with the sibling. As Engebretsen points out, marriage in current day China entails "social recognition as it represents the crossing of a symbolic threshold to social and sexual maturity, as well as the assumption of social responsibility" (21). That is,

[12] An epithalamium is a song written for a bride as she goes to consummate the matrimony. To mind springs Edmund Spenser's poem of the same name, which finishes asking for her wife's womb to be fertile. This cruelly contrasts with the "old haggard" in Hong's poem. Incidentally, in this part, Hong directly or indirectly addresses other poets such as Wallace Stevens, Samuel Coleridge or John Berryman.

by refusing to marry out of convenience or social pressure, the sibling is overtly turning down her invitation to the community and must therefore pay the consequences.

Indeed, Freud's suggestion that the "symptoms of neurosis … are essentially substitutive gratifications for unfulfilled sexual wishes" (105) is echoed in the sibling's adaptation to city life when in, "Of the Old Colonial Dutch Quarters", she claims that she too has "an obsession" (47): a painter who works at a factory that reproduces master pieces to be sold to people in "a place called Florida" (ibid.)[13]. In "Of the Express Bus Route to the Capital" the painter has metonymically become "Rembrandt", and the sibling learns that he rides the same bus as she does. She fantasizes about meeting him, but immediately wonders "even if I did sit next to him, what would I say?" (50). What is portrayed here is the rigid institution of courtship as a social obstacle that hampers the satisfaction of individual desires. In other words, it is the effect of the Foucauldian bio-power at work, since in the scheme "to control large masses of people there is also an attempt to impose forms of subjectivity" (Layder 109). Thus, although the sibling manages to reject the social norm that compels her to find a man, any man, she is still unable to break free from the more deeply rooted social impositions. According to Engebretsen, this is because "the ability to make an individual choice is circumscribed by structures that uphold certain preexisting dominant social values" (74). That is, even if one is to flaunt a veneer of defiance, the Super-ego will still guard the gates to satisfaction.

[13] The adjective that qualifies the boomtown in the title acquires here a second meaning, which points to the "art" in artful. However, sneering at the idea of tacky reproductions of classic paintings misses something essential in the industrial Chinese idiosyncrasy. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han perfectly describes it in his book *Shanzhai* (2017), where he explains the tradition made art of creating counterfeit objects which are not looked down on. Han explains that because the conception of the self as identical is lost in Buddhism, the idea of copying anything is unthinkable. Interestingly, Han suggests that Chinese capitalism and democracy system may be a sort of *shanzhai* version of Western capitalism.

The sibling's ersatz love story with Rembrandt comes to an end in "Of the Central Language Radio Headquarters". One day, the painter does not show up to his routine smoke break and the woman becomes concerned, her concern growing into "an obsession" (54). After a week's absence, she gathers the courage to ask the factory manager and finds out her beloved has moved on "to the next city to work at the Renoir factory" (ibid). Now, we are told, "he wants to paint beautiful women" (ibid.). Her obsession lost, in "Of the Sport Stadium"[14] the sibling confesses to letting days pass between sleep and work, i.e. staving off a disappointing reality either by dreaming or by taking up her role in the normalizing environment of the factory.

Consequently, "experience eludes" (55) her; unfulfilled, she merely survives. However, as if losing herself were not enough, the sibling is "full of shame" (ibid.), which makes her drop her head. Foreshadowing the smart snow that connects everyone in "The World Cloud", heavy rain falls over the city, bonding its inhabitants through umbrellas underneath which Shangdu becomes "a field of dropped heads" (ibid.). This otherwise puzzling reaction finds its explanation in Thomas Scheff's deference-emotion system, which posits a relation between shame and conformity in authoritarian social organizations. According to him, conformity is tied to sanctions and "nonconformity is punished by lack of deference and feelings of shame" (12). Together with formal and public sanctions, there is a "complex and highly efficient system of informal sanctions that encourages conformity" (2). On the one hand, shame is "generated by the virtually constant monitoring of the self in relation to

[14] The piece's title may point to what Anne-Marie Brady called a case of "mass distraction" in an article where she claims that, in China, "hosting the Olympics was used as an opportunity for a major propaganda effort" (1) in which behind a façade of the endorsement of human rights, illegal detentions, torture and censorship were rampant. Examples of this abound in "Shangdu".

others" (4);[15] on the other, shame generates more shame. This recursiveness produces the "potentially limitless spiral" (7) that may lead to "pathological states of shame, which give rise to rigid or excessive conformity (12). For those strong enough to overcome shame, civilization's power saves other means of control.

II.III. For the greater good

The unfulfilled egos in this part confront a different kind of enemy. If in "Ballad of Our Jim" the state appears as tangential to the lives of the main characters, it takes up a larger role in "Shangdu". From a Foucauldian perspective, whereas the first part showcases punishment still inflicted on the body, here violence can be said to pertain to the soul[16], as a shift is perceived from punishment to discipline. This is not due to humanitarian reasons, but because there is a transition in the right to punish from royal vengeance to an interest in the greater good of society (*Discipline* 90). The transitional character of the period reflects on the fact that, together with incarceration, executions still occur.

An example of this can be found in "Of Future Wireless Highrise 110", where a female worker strikes alone before a construction site next to where the sibling lives. At night, she can hear the wailing sound of police sirens; the following morning, "the construction site is empty" (51). "Of the World's Largest Multilevel Parking Garage" offers another example in a somewhat magical realism fashion. The multi-level parking mentioned in the title points to the result of crane operators going on strike, and their decision to use their

[15] Scheff's system offers an example of the mechanisms running behind Foucault's disciplinary society, where "The normalization of behaviour and identities achieved by disciplinary techniques relies heavily on individuals' capacity and willingness to monitor their own behavior" (Layder 109).
[16] Foucault defines the soul that "inhabits" modern man as the "effect and the instrument of a political anatomy" (DP 30).

machines to sequester all city vehicles until their demands are met. Harsh reality shows up when the day of the meeting between the operators and government officials army men turn up and "all the operators conveniently disappeared" (ibid.). Unlike the dissenters in "Ballad of Our Jim", the troublemakers are neither shot nor hanged, but locked away, where their "immorality can be measured and corrected and controlled by a calculated economy of punishments" (Schrift 143). In other words, they are reprogrammed to become docile and useful members of society. Paradoxically, official retribution works to instill a sense of order, but leaves the city paralyzed by the same token, since in the absence of operators, "no one knows how to work the cranes and release the vehicles" (Hong 51). The unknown fate of the strikers highlights the ominous presence of the state without the spilling of blood. However, given the transitional period depicted in "Shangdu", blood is sometimes shed.

"Of the Millennial Promenade Along the River" offers a combined example of the two issues I have been analyzing, namely pressure on marriage and the disposability of citizens. The picture is that of leisurely passers-by, and vendors who sell them "pinwheels, pancakes and roast meats of all kinds, even sticks of prickly little seahorses"[17]. However, something more sinister hides behind "the vendor's umbrella fringes": the government has set up cameras "to catch conspirators" (47). Eventually, a man is arrested and executed for turning a surveillance camera towards the sunset. If this piece openly touches upon the issue of governmental control over citizens, on the other hand and more subtly, it is another example of unsatisfied desires.

[17] This poem was inspired by video artist Walid Raad's piece "I only wish I could weep" (Hong 95). In it, we are shown faux secret footage recorded by an official from Beirut who is surveilling some suspects on a promenade by the sea. Hong basically adapted the same image to her fictional Shangdu.

Foucault's suggestion of the probable expansion of Jeremy Bentham's ideas on surveillance as featured in his *Panopticon* (1787)[18] from penitentiaries to the whole of society has been confirmed in the endless cameras recording citizens all over the world[19]. The whole point of this surveillance scheme as conceived of by Bentham is that people will behave simply because somebody may be watching. In fact, as the poem goes, "everyone knows about them" (Hong 47). According to Alan Schrift, the goal of the disciplinary society is to generate an individual who, "by internalizing the supervisory gaze of the other, takes all the disciplinary tasks of society upon itself and forces itself to conform to the social norm" (146) without external coercion. The question remains of whether panopticism is efficient, since individuals continue to rebel. The prawn vendor in "Of Lucky Highrise Apartment 88's Courtyard or Epithalamion" may hint at a possible answer.

At the end of that poem, we are told that among the uninvited guests to the wedding, there is a "fried prawn vendor who turned his surveillance camera towards the rising and setting sun" (46/9-10). Later, when the vendor is arrested, his fellow workers comment on the possible reasons behind the vendor's demeanor. One calls him a "saboteur" and another claims they should all follow his lead, as the cameras "take away business!" (47). A third man points to the definitive reason, as he states that the vendor had acted on spite, since "he was stupid in love and his lover walked out on him" (47). Given the age gap between the spouses in "Epithalamion", it is safe to regard it as a marriage of convenience. According to Engebretsen, male and female homosexuals "find that a heteronormative marriage …

[18] In this classic, Bentham contrived a cylindrical glass tower which would stand in the middle of a circular prison. In this way, the inmates would be under the impression of undergoing constant vigilance by the prison guards.

[19] Chinese surveillance would deserve an essay of its own. In the 2016 Intelligent Visual Surveillance Conference held in Beijing, panels ranged from Low-Level Preprocessing, Surveillance Systems, to Tracking, Robotics, and Identification, Detection, Recognition, or Behavior, Activities, Crowd Analysis (Zhang & Kaiqi).

usually arranged by their parents or other kin, is the most suitable option" (122) to conform to the norm. Could not the young husband be the vendor's unrequited lover?

Thus, all the pieces in "Shangdu" serve to prove Freud's contention that, "On the one hand, love opposes the interests of culture; on the other, culture menaces love with grievous restrictions" (57). The unstoppable social machine devours, once again, the individual rebels. The panoply of earthly goods delivered by progress does not suffice to soothe the ailments of the lonely. The last poem in this part attests to this, as a man, one of the many "Shangdu's choked" (61/3) with, laments his existence.

II.IV. Alone Together

The poetic voice in "The Seeds Seller's Sonnet" tells us that "History intones catch up catch up while a number rots, then another" (61/11). The man claims to be "generations old" (61/4) and still a virgin. The "tripey thoughts that wrack" his "loins" (61/6) point to a regret of what could have been. The seeds he sells have found no buyer: he will have no offspring; his social role will remain unfulfilled. The man's life passes before his eyes and in an otherworldly farewell he announces that finally he has "had the most marvelous piece of luck I died" (61/13).

This wish for death echoes Freud's question when he wonders what it is that we obtain from a life so "full of hardship and starved of joys and so wretched that we can only welcome death as our deliverer?" (37). Hong's choice to end with an anonymous character further shows the interchangeable reality of individuals. In fact, this is symbolically relevant, in that the dying man's last words are not even his, but a quote from John Berryman's "The Glories of the World". Ironically, the man in Berryman's poem is

confessing his sins of lust. The grim message Hong seems to offer the reader is that, in spite of a life of lack or excess, death awaits us all.

In *Civilization*, Freud tried to prove to the contesters of progress what a barbaric state we would find ourselves in should they prevent it from unfolding. Spiritually repressed and neurotic individuals, fearful and oppressed subjects turn out to be the lesser evil for the sake of communal life. In its third and last part, *Engine Empire* leads the reader into uncharted territories where tech giants take over and virtual happiness conceals a dismal reality. In Hong's dystopia, however, such an unpleasant reality can be enhanced, and humanity's communion is finally achieved by way of virtual interconnectedness. Such a world resembles our own. The future is already happening and it seems to call upon us: catch up, catch up!

III. "The World Cloud" or The Hijacked Id

The third and last section of the book takes place back in the USA, in California, thus closing the locus circle. The location is perhaps only symbolically important, since the relevant inhabited space that is described in these pieces is mostly a virtual one. Composed of eleven poems, "The World Cloud" unfolds in an imagined future, closing thus also the time line which began with the Gold Rush and continued with current day China. As in the others, in this last section confused and lovelorn characters are beset with existential maladies. The protagonist here is a woman who has lost her position at a technological company and spends her days moving between thoughts and memories of her own and of other people's[20]. Structurally, Hong resorts to free verse poems in order to create a more ethereal feeling. In this part, the poetic voice drags the reader along in every perception, conveying a sensation of makeshift ubiquity.

Whereas the first and second thirds of the book seem to confirm Freud's discouraging suspicion that perhaps "humanity could be most successfully united into one great whole if there were no need to trouble about the happiness of individuals" (108), in "The World Cloud", this idea is challenged as the messianic fanfare of tech giants heralds, in Éric Sadin's words, the "near realization of an ideal life" (103). Since this section is set in the future, the parallel I have been drawing between the development of individuals and societies must in turn take a leap of risk. In this chapter, the Freudian subconscious, or Id, gets hijacked, as the disciplined individuals' regained freedom turns out to be nothing but a

[20] Interestingly, authors Boy Lüthje, Stefanie Hürtgen, Peter Pawlicki, and Martina Sproll show in their *From Silicon Valley to Shenzhen* (2013) how the relocation of the production of technological components from America to emerging nations – especially to China – caused an unemployment crisis in the local sector. Since "Not only manufacturing was moved from industrial centers, but also product development and design of chips and software" (1), there is a subtle link between the second and third part of the poem.

charade. This psychological sleight of hand can be unveiled through philosopher Byung-Chul Han's update of Foucault's concept of biopolitics.

III.I. A "Kinda Oceanic Feelin'"

Although not fully endorsing it, Freud popularized the idea of an "oceanic feeling" suggested to him by Romain Rolland, who coined the term to express a "feeling of oneness with the universe" (17). According to Sadin, this has been finally achieved owing to information technologies, which "offer the quasi-miraculous opportunity to be easily and constantly connected" (106)[21]. In "The World Cloud", the Freudian feeling becomes a reality. Such a feat is accomplished by way of what Hong describes in the section's first poem, "Come Together", as a "snow like pale cephalopods" (65/1); a techno-meteorological phenomenon which can be seen as snow proper, since it is a frozen element that falls from the skies. This smart snow, however, works as a data collector and connects everyone into a "shared dream" (65/3), which is reminiscent of the quote from James Joyce's "The Dead" that precedes the book[22]. Although the opening piece offers ground for optimism as the poetic voice claims that "now my imagination can be any nation I want" (66/25), the more we learn about the smart snow, the more worrisome it becomes.

All the pieces in "The World Cloud" share a common ambiguity towards this technological future. "Come Together" shows a picture where "immaculate / snow dusts the blue pine trees" (65/11-2) and a "lonely child dreams of having one friend / to share cherry ice cones" (65/17-8) first, but immediately "dreams about suicide" (65/21). "Engines

[21] My translation.
[22] In Joyce's short story, snow – but also ice and cold – is deployed as an element that relates the lives of all Dubliners, both dead and alive.

Within the Thrones" delves deeper into this morally dubious invasion of privacy, as the woman celebrates the possibility of "spelunking / in anyone's mind" (69/31-2). There, inside a "cave / pool with rock-colored flounder", there is also someone hiding, "half-transparent / with depression" (69/33-5). Freud suggests that when trying to empathize with those who suffer, "it is still impossible for us to feel ourselves into the position of these people" (38). In Hong's imagined future, however, interconnected consciousness allows people to dwell in somebody else's misery. In "Ready Made", the woman continues touring other people's minds, peeking into office workers in a "company retreat" (74/25) or, more poignantly, visiting terminal patients' "grey-eyed pulse" (73/23). Distressingly, she claims to hear "the fugitive voice / whispering *enough, leave me*" (73/26-7), only to offer back a blasé thought: "what to do with all this leisure." (74/31). Just like the sibling in her wall-less dwelling and the prawn vendors in Shangdu's promenade, the characters in "The World Cloud" are constantly under vigilance, although, in this section of Hong's book, the all-seeing eye[23] is virtually everywhere and it reaches far deeper into their inner selves.

III.II. The Inner Eye

One of the first poems in this section, "Year of the Amateur," works as a caveat and it is set before the time when people's daily lives and deepest memories could be accessed through virtual platforms; a time reminiscent of ours, where we all fritter time away watching idle videos online, following the unquestioned command to "Burn your chattel to keep the cloud afloat" (67/5). The current and apparently harmless habit of sharing personal information is thoroughly analyzed by Adam Henschke in his *Ethics in the Age of*

[23] Hong remarks in a note that in Korean "noon" means both "snow" and "eye" (95).

Surveillance (2017). There, he claims that our time is "marked by informational technologies which endorse, encourage and enable us to live lives under constant surveillance" (4). In "Ready Made", the woman says that "the booming trade of information / exists without our paid labor" (32-3), thus echoing Henschke's remark on ICTs' "ability to make ourselves the subject of observation" (ibid.); i.e. the fact that it is us who willingly give up the precious information for the benefit of faceless corporations.

Alarmism, however, begs the question of what is actually so precious about this information. Henschke avers that isolated bits of innocuous data are irrelevant, but become valuable when, once accrued, they form virtual identities. In his book, he posits a difference between the identity linked to a corporeal being and a virtual identity. In the latter, "virtual" means that such an identity "is neither an actual person in the world, nor is it a particular agent's cognitive experience" (125). Furthermore, virtual identities "carry special moral importance" (5). Henschke draws a line between personal information that is in fact innocuous and that which may prove harmful to individuals. On the one hand, there is the kind whose collection involves devices that help users to make their lives more pleasurable. In "The Quattrocento", for example, the woman is riding a taxi and everything on the vehicle appears to be adjustable to her comfort: the radio plays the right tune after "a longed / sweet spot of identification" (81/6-7); her mind is soothed with "an aerial footage of clouds" (81/20) and a new feature offers the possibility of seeing "your face in their formation / before focus" (81/21-2). On the other, there is private information related to health or personal finances. In "Who's Who", the woman is looking out the window and spots a man selling old mattresses in the street and wonders whether to invite him in. She runs a scan on him and discovers the man is a "convicted felon of petty larceny" (75/12),

hesitates and finally discards him. The sharing of personal information in this last example is obviously problematic. However, ICTs conceal a deeper threat than discrimination.

It is the information which Henschke considers innocuous that puts the individual at stake, not in relation to others but to oneself. In "The Quattrocento", the woman is fully aware of the fact that she is being studied and acknowledges that "focus groups" (81/27) keep record of her attention spans. Whereas for Henschke the entire purpose of surveillance is to produce information that could compromise individuals, Han straightforwardly warns us that "Big Data is a highly efficient psychopolitical instrument that makes it possible to achieve comprehensive knowledge of the dynamics of social communication." To be sure, by way of the analysis of our behavior, for instance, we could become easily targeted as prospective consumers for a smorgasbord of retail goods. It is precisely this against which the woman rebels when she claims "I don't want to be a niche / I want to be a yardstick" (Hong 81/48). The idea of becoming part of a category in an automated selling list seems to elicit a feeling of discomfort as one gets pigeonholed, with thousand others, according to what we think are our most cherished features. Han's preoccupation, nonetheless, aims at something deeper, as "Big Data has announced the end of the person who possesses free will." Indeed, the real threat penetrates beyond the surface and affects freedom and individuality *tout-court*.

III.III. The I(d)mpostor

Unlike the incipient central authority in "Ballad of Our Jim" and the full-fledged oppressive government in "Shangdu", in "The World Cloud" it is not clear what the ruling order is or how it works. As Layder points out, "computers have meant that mechanisms of

information processing have extended the boundaries of behavior monitoring beyond the limited confines of organizational spaces" (109). In "Come Together", the woman suggests that corporations, the true ruling power, now hide "behind a wall / of woven passwords (65/13-14), echoing Han's worrying reminder that "[t]he greater power is, the more quietly it works". Indeed, tech giants have become the emperors in the shadows.

Sadin has described the awakening of this empire in *La siliconization du monde* (2016). There, he traces the origin and development of the technological industry set in Silicon Valley, California -incidentally, the very same locus of *Engine Empire*'s third part. Sadin's main focus falls on what he calls a "siliconian worldview" that "posits techno-scientific rationality as the privileged vector of the perfection of the organization of societies and life conditions" (103)[24]. This perfection, claims Sadin, will be achieved by way of the harvesting of endless data of our daily habits, which after being dutifully analyzed will first give us options, but eventually exert a full control of our lives. The key element in the fall of our free will is the personal assistant.

In her monumental *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), Shoshana Zuboff describes such devices as "another Trojan horse in which the determination to render and monetize your life is secreted under the veil of 'assistance' and embellished with the poetry of 'personalization'" (246). In this, she aligns with Sadin, who claims that "spontaneous relations" between individuals and virtual assistants will make "of our actions, from the most banal to the crucial ones, to be oriented by the suggestive power of personal assistants" (120)[25]. Zuboff's and Sadin's forebodings materialize in "A Visitation", where the woman is daydreaming, looking out the window when she sees a flower whose name

[24] My translation.
[25] My translation.

escapes her. Instantly, "The voice of Gregory Peck booms: Honey Suckle" (70/4). The woman mentions not remembering things, which clearly points to the possible consequences of not exercising memory because everything is accessible online. However, something more sinister looms. In Zuboff's words, personal assistants such as Apple's SIRI or Amazon's Alexia represent "a new frontier of behavioral surplus where the dark data continent of your inner life … is summoned into the light for others' profit" (242)[26]. That is, the problem arises when choice is subtly replaced with veiled commands.

In his book *Psychopolitics* (2017), Han claims that the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics is insufficient to explain the exploitation of the psyche. According to him, power currently takes on a more permissive, friendlier form as it "cosies up to the psyche rather than disciplining it through coercion or prohibitions". Thus, individuals live a false experience of freedom as they voluntarily give in the seemingly innocuous information that will subjugate them. The first line in "Year of the Amateur" invites us to "recall the frontier inside us when the business / of memory booms" (67/1). This frontier can be read as the limit between the Ego and the Id or subconscious. In Freud's theory, the subconscious is the unknown pit from where our deepest desires come. The Ego works as a filter which reflects those desires in ciphered fashion. Han claims that, through the analysis of our behavior, "It is possible that Big Data can even read desires we do not know we harbor". Thus, through the analysis of our every action and thought, companies would be able to generate new needs and wants. Of course, such a goal has always been the purpose of advertising. However, the implications here are tragic: choice is no longer presented to the Ego, while desire stems directly from the "hijacked" Id.

[26] The resemblance of this part's data mining with the gold-digging in "Ballad of Our Jim" is as obvious and uncanny as it is not accidental. In fact, Sadin draws attention to this coincidence, too.

This invasion of privacy is poignantly made manifest in “A Visitation”. The woman is lost in idle thinking and, out of the blue, she is said to “look at the toaster and think taco” (Hong 70/15). Is there anything more private and unimportant than indulging in aimless thoughts? But in Hong’s future, “smart snow [is] monitoring you” (70/19), and from that silly concoction a pop-up advert is produced offering “a trip to Cabo San Lucas” (70/17). The ubiquitous snow is still in need of some adjustments, but is nonetheless already at work. Some lines later the woman is said to be awaken from her virtual hypnosis by the door-bell ringing and real life interrupts in the form of a courier delivering groceries. Somewhat puzzled with the content, she asks herself: “Why did you order a dozen cantaloupes?” (71/37). Unable to account for her own actions, the alienation from herself and the conquest of her Id has already begun. The virtual squatter has settled in.

III.IV. Escaping The Shared Nightmare

“Get Away From It All” is the last poem before the epilogue. Here, the woman begs to be disconnected. She has become aware of the control exerted on her mind and wants to break free from the obscene encroachment. She pitifully asks the voices in her head to end the charade and to drop her “on a quiet coast / dotted with sandpipers” (84/17-8). In her virtual hallucination, she reaches the beach and sees in the distance some “nudist bathers” (84/21) that she takes for UN soldiers. In other words, she is longing to be rescued. The nudists, who are dubbed “loafing rebels against / the enhanced” (85/25-6), invite her to join them. One of them, with a drenched beard, tells her to let go of her clothes, as he frees her with his words: “You are not guilty to me” (85/34). Guilt is the main deterrent in the

pursuit of individual desire. Is this not precisely what the rebellious individual wants to hear?

It is impossible to tell, nonetheless, whether the woman is actually with the nudists at the beach or whether they are figments of her hijacked imagination. There is an insistence on the senses, as the woman is told to "go into the unknown" and smell the "salt, rancid / scent of water, seagull, / blades of grass" (84/28-31). However, in previous poems we are told that reality can be enhanced in every way. The only thing that differentiates this fragment is that the people the woman is visiting are called rebels. If they are indeed rebels, that means they should not be accessible through the smart snow. Yet, at the beginning of the poem it is suggested that the sandy haven might just be another illusion. Thus, both for the woman and the reader, the ability to tell reality from fantasy has become terrifyingly impossible. An attempt of a solution to this quandary may be found in the book's last poem, "The Fable of The Last Untouched Town."

III.V. Back to the Future

An epilogue of sorts, "Fable" is divided into four parts and it tells the story of a Huxleyan future concomitant to the one mentioned in the third part of the book. Glaciations seem to have hit the world, only that the ice that freezes everything is the smart ice which pervades everything in "The World Cloud". These people may be the heirs to the nudists who rejected the smart snow. Deprived of electricity, they have gone back to a tribal

society with a king who governs them. People have heard "wild rumors" (89/15) of a more advanced world where "people live to 150" and grow "hearts out of cells" (89/16-7)[27].

These wildlings are not afraid of pain or dearth. They abandon their elderly members to die in the cold and tell "no fairy stories to ease children's ears" (91/48). After a storm, a glacier appears in a stadium. They try to melt it, but the task proves impossible. The king orders his subjects to "chip away" (92/75) the mountain of ice. Wind bursts and one of the inhabitants of the last town accidentally swallows a snowflake, going into psychotropic shock. The intoxicated man is unhesitatingly executed. This episode echoes Freud's contention that once inhibitions cease to operate in individuals' minds, violence "manifests itself spontaneously and reveals men as savage beasts to whom the thought of sparing their own kind is alien" (69). The poetic voice admits being marveled at the sight of the glacier, but hides her feelings for her own safety. Heiress to a lineage of rebels, she decides to steal a grain of ice. One night, she swallows it. The poem ends with her puzzling words: "And this is what I saw" (93/88).

Hong's provocative ending suggests that the whole poem may be nothing but the transcendental sojourn of the final rebel[28]. In any case, considering the result of the previous accidental snow-swallowing episode, it is safe to assume that the book's last heroine perishes just as the other insurgents before her. *Engine Empire* ends, as if with a blow, leaving the reader astounded and with the gloomy feeling of having borne witness to the confirmation of the eternal defeat of the rebellious individual.

[27] According to Sadin, eternal life is one of the megalomaniac promises made by tech visionaries.
[28] Certain aspects in "The World Cloud" surely hint in that direction, as the female protagonist appears to somewhat travel with her mind to places way too similar to the ones described in parts one and two of the book.

IV. Conclusion, or For the Rebels to Come

> "We demand that art turns into a life-changing force. We seek to abolish the separation between poetry and mass communication, to reclaim the power of media from the merchants and return it to the poets and the sages"
>
> Franco Berardi, "Manifesto of Post-Futurism", *After the Future*

One of Freud's main goals in *Civilization* was to contest those who claimed that "our so-called civilization itself is to blame for a great part of our misery, and we should be much happier if we were to give it up and go back to primitive conditions" (35). Throughout these pages, I have tried to tease out the ways in which Hong's characters may (or may not) confirm Freud's contention that the maladies caused by repressing our instincts are part and parcel of accepting a civilized life. All the rebels in *Engine Empire* succumb when trying to escape society's yoke: from ethnically ambiguous sharp shooters to despondent factory workers and the unsatisfied inhabitants of a virtual dystopia. For the ones who do succeed, the upshot is tragic[29]. Hong's poem, then, offers little hope, and its protagonists find no solace and no redemption. However, it would be wrong of us to admit their defeats as ours, or to be led astray by the characters' fatal denouement, which can obscure the book's import beyond aesthetic enjoyment.

Indeed, the relevance of *Engine Empire* also falls on the poem as discourse. The unraveling of its critical message corresponds to each reader in the first place, and to the literary critic later. As Terry Eagleton points out, "Every literary theory presupposes a

[29] Freud's own wishful thinking in 1930 was that the future would bring the end of the struggle between individuals themselves and with civilization, "however greatly it may oppress the lives of individuals at the present time" (109).

certain use of literature" (182), and is inevitably tied to some form of ideology. Similarly, in his discussion of fascism, Walter Benjamin maintained that "all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in … war." (41), and suggested undoing this path by turning aesthetics into politics. Cathy Park Hong has answered that call when she wonders "What visions of alternate worlds can we create and what coalitions of genres and forms can we build out of political kinship?" (Poetics Statement 193). As a poet, her visions and worlds are made of words.

"World building rests on word building", claims Pafunda, "… and Cathy Park Hong speaks a truth loud enough for the power to hear" (195). The wretched life of poor orphan Jim moves or revolts us, but is forgotten once the book is closed. The fact that wars tear the lives of families, that human greed ravages entire populations is the latent message behind the aesthetic veil. We are entitled to be touched by the harrowing beauty of the lonely, sad existence of Shangdu's citizens, lest we forget that oppressive governments and injustice still pervade the world. The frightening and puzzling images of the future can amuse us as long as we remain aware of the fact that our virtual tomorrow is just around the corner. Camus claimed that "The spirit of rebellion can exist only in a society where theoretical equality conceals great factual inequalities" (20). Today, that society encompasses the whole of humankind. Poets of the world, arise.

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APPENDIX

Ballad of the Range

The whole country is in a duel and we want no part of it.
They see us ride, they say
:all you men going the wrong di-rection.
:We're getting to California. We ain't got time to enlist.

If some forts ready to be sawed to colt towns,
others are abandoned since rickety-limbed Southies
couldn't let their grudges aside and mauled
each other to blood strops.

All around us forts lie built and unbuilt, half-
walled towns as men yoke themselves to state,
but we brothers are heading through fields of blue rye and plains
scullground to silt sand

afar, the boomtowns of precious ore.

Balld of Rube Parade with Their Quiver of Spades

Nights we gamble with henchmen French
who warn us they used to hack rebels
when it was hellfire revolution in their land.
Still they lust for human game.

Our Jim starts singing his infernal ballad –

:Shut yer trap Jim.

He watches silent as our game
Ratchets to pistolfire brawl.
Goddamfilthy French gores us so ropes
Of blood gout from our brother's gullet

We scream: Do it boy! Shoot!
He aims cold, slays them all,
exciting us no end.
He says: I'm done finishing your games.

Ballad in I

Sing in this blinking twilight,
in this mining district filling with wild
Irish striking it rich, spinning
Christ, swigging spirits, rigging spits,

picking fights, swinging fists,
slitting twitching skin in livid fits,
crippling limbs, spitting kinnikinnick,
filling trim tins with hissins piss.

His mind's still spiting, knifing with skill,
his victimizing intrinsic with his mind,
grinding within his skin,
Jim sings: I'm tiring, I'm tiring.

His grim instinct wilting.

Dispiriting Jim, climbing hill's hilt,
drifting Jim, sighing in this lilting,
sinking light.

Aubade

I long for hamine morning to lift me
from my hisshurled life but my
hellwhelmed county of harsh scruffed
crops is marooned, my plow a beached
whale's browbone on morose miles of moore.
Heft, heft. I cry to my ox
but no hint of green wort. Just midges
to torment my ox. You intone
forego the lament, willingly forfeit the ai-ai.
so I slaughter my ox. So hi-hi!
I am ready in my plaidwhelmed
puffpuff golf hat. Ready to be
whelmed by a petstore cacophony
of crickets shirruping in their cage balls,
juddering slam of hammering jack,
humming sussurations of catamarans,
aerosol striations of welder's firecrack,
then a caracas of fist cracks
after workers slurp off their goggled specs
to a bassooning fog horn honing
so spooning lovers know when to return
to their dawn shift, tuning cymbals
for toy baboons who clap clap,
Hail the Industrial Age, hail!

Of the Old Colonial Dutch Quarters

When I imagine this city, it is not the city that I want but the city that I fear. But I too have an obsession. He is one ofthe painters who works in the Rembrandt factory. He paints five Rembrandt self-portrait paintings a day which I hear are sold to rich town houses and hotels in a place called Florida. He is renowned to be the fastest painter in Shangdu and he has completed ten thousand Rembrandt self-portraits. In the mornings, I walk past him when he is on his smoke break. Today, I catch him sniffing his hand.

Seed Seller's Sonnet

My mind slides like a sword in my mouth
and I awake caked in spit.
Shangdu's choked with blokes, not enough dames.
I am generations old yet –
I am a virgin.
Tripey thoughts wrack my loins.
I am a runt squeaming for a grim little teat.

Though once I was so decent from such humble backgrounds,
my ma bit her arm to feed us brothers three.
Am I cursed? I drink the myrrh her life who forced me alive.
History intones catch up, catch up while a number rots, then another.

Beautiful bicycles, city of broken spokes, a thousand women floated to heaven.
Then I had the most marvelous piece of luck I died.

Year of the Amateur

Recall the frontier inside us when the business
of memory booms, when broadbands uncoil
and cloud swell with sticky portals, amassing
to a monsoon of live-streams.
Burn your chattel to keep the cloud afloat
so its tears can freeze to snow.
The voice flatlines in this season of pulp:
The artist makes miniature churches out of drain pulp,
the Indonesian rainforest is pulped,
the last illuminated gold leaves are pulped so we

gather and watch an otter nibble
sweet urchin to a pulp.
We laugh softly.

A Visitation

Your are at home.
You are wearing bicycle shorts though you don't own a bike.
Outside your window, you see a flower you don't recognize.
The voice of Gregory Peck booms: Honey Suckle.
You don't know anything anymore.
You remember an old trivia show you watched when you were young.
The contestant went to Stanford.
You remember his name: Stan Chan.
The first question was always absurdly easy,
almost as if it was testing your listening skills.
The host asked Stan Chan what a nectarine
was closest to: a.orange, b.peach, c.banana, d.grape.
Stan chuckled: Well, I think I should know this one. It's a. orange.
You remember the host's expression.
You look at the toaster and think taco.
An ad opos up in the air for a trip to Cabo San Lucas.
The snow is still beta.
You feel the smart snow monitoring you,
uploading your mind so anyone can access your content.
Circuts cross and you hear a one-sided chat:
Da! Da! Da!
You tap in the air for the volume control and listen to Ravel.
You refresh your feed. Nothing from him.
It is too hot here.

You hate this satellite Californian town
near the satellite tech campus where you and your husband
used to work as data scanners.
When they laid both of you off,
you tried to work as freelancers from your home offices.
You used to chirp at each other like demented birds.
Another chime.
It's a real chime.
A man delivering your groceries: a dozen cantaloupes.
He looks like your husband.
You think of inviting him in.
Why did you order a dozen cantaloupes?
You hear a woman crying.
Lately, you've been fascinated by a user-generated hologram:
an ethnically ambiguous boy who pretends to drop dead from a shoot-out.
The boy wakes up when his mother comes home.
She scolds him and turn off the camera.
You blink to go offline.
It is like all the quiet Sundays of your childhood.
You think you hear your husband sigh but he's only breathing.
He used to stare into the middle distance
for weeks until you lugged him to bed.
You tucked him in.

Get Away from It All

Go, go, I breathe the air
    flossed with silence
moving to melt

into any form what
choice when they
finish your thought

did you mean numerous no
numinous
when minds flood into minds
yet one creed molds

this town of giant convenience
a white church
of blond wooden pews burning

a dark pile of something
enough this terrors,
clarity, empathy, please

drop me onto a quiet coast
dotted with sandpipers
the horizon hyphenates

are they UN forces no
they are nudist bathers.
They have beached,
Dashed with amorous wet,
they call like walruses,
those loafing rebels against
the enhanced,
I see too much

yet go, go into the unknown,

smell the salt, rancid
scent of water, seagull,
blades of grass and listen,

the one with the sodden beard says
undrape yourself,
you are not guilty to me.