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Utopia, Tongzhi, The Membranes

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersection of queer utopianism, cyborgian embodiment, and literary critique in Chi Ta-wei's *The Membranes*. Drawing from queer theory, affect studies, and utopian studies, it examines how the novel engages with speculative futures, gender fluidity, and technological mediation. The text destabilizes conventional binaries—body/machine, inside/outside, real/simulated—through the protagonist Momo's disembodied yet hyper-sensory experience in a cybernetic dystopia. The discussion contextualizes the novel within broader Sinophone queer studies, interrogating the shifting meanings of tongzhi (comrade) and *ku'er* (queer) in relation to transnational discourses. By critically engaging with Muñoz's reparative utopianism and Baudrillard's hyperreality, the article argues that *The Membranes* stages a paradoxical queer futurity, where identity, embodiment, and reality are perpetually deferred. This reading underscores the novel's significance in challenging normative epistemologies of gender and sexuality, while exposing the fragility of utopian aspirations in hyperreal landscapes.

KEYWORDS: *queer utopia, cyborg identity, Sinophone studies, hyperreality, gender fluidity*

Utopia is ... most authentic when we cannot imagine it.

—Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia"

Introduction: The Reparative Utopia of Queerness

What happens when "queer" meets "utopia"?

In his now classic *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz writes of a queer utopianism against the impoverished "prison house" of "the here and now" (1). His interest is not in utopian imaginaries. Following Ernst Bloch abstract utopias. The book consciously frames itself as proposing a "methodology" of "anticipatory illumination" that leaps between historical sites and the future (3). At the center is a series of engagements with aesthetic objects that attempt to delineate "a surplus of affect and meaning" that "helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time

and place” (5). Utopia inheres paradoxically in its affective openness and material impossibility. In effect, *Cruising Utopia* moves the discourse of queer aesthetic athwart articulations of minoritized sexual identity. Rather, aesthetic practices consist in feeling one’s way through the inadequate present towards an alternative future.

Muñoz’s work partakes in utopian studies’ turn away from elucidating representations committed to the teleology of progress, perfectibility, and rationality. Take this much-cited line from Fredric Jameson’s review of Louis Marin’s *Utopiques*:

To understand Utopian discourse in terms of neutralization is indeed precisely to propose to grasp it as a process, as *energeia*, enunciation, productivity, and implicitly or explicitly to repudiate more traditional and conventional views of Utopia as sheer representation, as the “realized” vision of this or that ideal society or social ideal.

Such an emphasis on utopia as process underpins its contemporary refashioning as a critical device that instills desire for radical change. If utopian texts that envisage systematic perfection are still to be studied, they are approached negatively, to be examined for their ideological unconscious that props up their imaginary resolution of political contradictions. Hence, the primary capacity of utopianism is to act critically in the present rather than to project a stable future. Tellingly, in their essay “’68 or Something,” “written in favor of refusing to learn the lessons of history, of refusing to relinquish utopian practice, of refusing the apparently inevitable movement from tragedy to farce,” Lauren Berlant suggested the phrase “utopia/failure” (125-26), on failing once, and failing better. Even in Muñoz’s explicit call for a collective futurity, the subject of such collectivity remains noticeably absent and open-ended. That is, queer utopianism is not in the name of one sociological group but stakes its claims in an alternative future.

The question for us then concerns the specificity of the “how” of critique. “Sensing” is the name Muñoz proffers for the dash that conjoins queer and utopia. Frank O’Hara’s “Having a Coke with You,” we are told, signifies “a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality” (6). One might wonder what is so queer about sharing a coke with possibly a lover. Elsewhere in the book, Muñoz refers to his practice as “willfully ideal” (86), leaping directly from presenting the poem to overwriting it with ephemeral queer affects. The analytical economy recalls how Eve Sedgwick once described the reparative reader in

Proustian terms as someone who “helps himself again and again” (150). Departing from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Sedgwick turns to the object-relations theory of Melanie Klein and dwells on the subject’s integratory drive “to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole (...) available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn” (128). Muñoz has built on Sedgwick and Klein to similarly theorize a reparative love that strives to “reconstruct a relational field” in order to “achieve the most provisional belonging” (“Feeling Brown” 683). For both theorists, herein lies the possibility for creativity. The turn to repair—to, that is, hold the object (of interpretation) together for sustenance and comfort—is an adaptive method that sublimates aggressions into life-affirming art. Here we glean deep affinity, characteristic of queer criticism from its inception, oscillating between artistic and critical engagements with the world. Subjects negotiating environments inimical to their flourishing may don thrown-away objects as a necessary tactic. Emphasis on survival sentimentalizes attachments by reducing sexuality to bare biological drives. The result is a utopia both aesthetic (because imaginary), and moralistic (because good). What is queer utopian is the investment in object relation.

The vision of aesthetic freedom resonates with what Jacques Rancière in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* terms “the politics of becoming-life of art (...) [which] identifies the forms of aesthetic experience with the forms of an other life. The finality it ascribes to art is to construct new forms of life in common and, hence, to eliminate itself as a separate reality” (43). Such aestheticism, as we have seen with Muñoz, always finds its “willfully idealized,” ameliorative objects because it insulates them from suspicion. At stake in the conjunction of queer and utopia is then not the specificity of sexual minority future imaginaries, so much as a shared modality of critique. This paper presses on the ground of queer studies’ reparative impulse, investigating Chi Ta-wei’s celebrated science fiction tale *The Membranes* (1996), the novella’s scholarly reception, and the agitations surrounding the term *tongzhi* in the field of Chinese and Sinophone queer studies. The goal is not to pinpoint a different form of queer aesthetic praxis. Nor am I interested in recuperating paranoid reading vis-à-vis its reparative other. Rather, following Lee Edelman, I insist on the “bad education” of a queer formalism. As Edelman cogently puts it, “if no formalism ‘can (...) fully dissociate itself’ from content it engages, if it can never forgo the world whose ‘reality’ it reads through a structuring law, it aims to sketch from *within* the

world the frame subtracted from that world for the world as such to take place” (23). Thus ironizing the ground for any allegorical or utopian investment, the hope is to put queer utopia’s anticipation of a-time-to-come into erasure.

Hyperreal *Tongzhi*

Set in the year 2100, when the surface world is no longer inhabitable due to intensified ultraviolet radiation unfiltered by the destroyed ozone layer, *The Membranes* sees humankind retreat underwater, following the story of a much coveted esthetician named Momo and her life in the dystopian world. Yet the narrative soon spirals into a chilling tale of self-discovery where Momo finds herself trapped in an infinite mirroring of herself. All that is left of Momo after a failed surgery to replace her virus-infected body parts is her brain, now at the end of a twenty-year contract Mother has signed to keep Momo’s brain alive with ISM Enterprises where she is implanted within a cyborg body laboring to repair combat droids. It turns out that what she has taken as her lived reality is nothing but finely orchestrated simulacra fed to her by Mother and the military corporation.

One curiosity surrounds the afterlife of *The Membranes*. Until very recently, critics and readers have been strangely unwilling to take on the brain-in-a-vat theme in fear that, one conjectures, it might jeopardize the text’s status as subversive and queer avant-garde. As if the ghost of René Descartes has not departed us, in spite of the repeated repudiation of “*cogito, ergo sum*” over the centuries, the Cartesian formal being continues to haunt the novel between the lines of our disavowal. Perhaps, the narrative has long anticipated such reception. In shunning away from the brain, have we not actually become the brain? Are we not in fact being fed the narrative in the same way Momo is dosed with endless discbooks by Mother? As Momo self-questions after realizing all that is left of them is brain, “had the observer become the observed” (112)?

At stake is more than the reversal. Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*, one is reminded, is not, as is sometimes believed, a work of radical skepticism, but an attempt to locate firm and certain ground for being and knowledge. By declaring onto-epistemological irrelevance of the extended thing (*res extensa*), including the human body, Descartes establishes irreducibility of self-determining thinking thing (*res cogitans*) from which God is then deduced as pure form. Readings that overidentify with Momo’s interiority risk reconstituting what Ian Hacking has

referred to as “neo-Cartesian bodies in parts,” where the plasticity of body fails to disrupt but rather reinscribes the mind-body duality. The way narrative voice stays inside Momo’s brain should alert us to an untenability of deducing any ready takeaways from the story along the metanarratives of hybridity, resistance, or subversion.

Reception of *The Membranes* is symptomatic, I think, of a persistent critical desire to idealize. Kadji Amin, referencing Judith Butler, argues that idealization is “a *purification* of one’s object that relies on the *repudiation* of its relationship to normative social forms”; as with Muñoz’s queer utopian hermeneutic, knowledge production thus becomes embroiled in a circular process of idealization, disappointment, and search (8). In a way, this is characteristic of current debate in the field between scholars of queer China studying Sinophone discontent. On the one hand, Howard Chiang has rightly taken to task China-focused scholarship tending to downplay the queering of *tongzhi*, originally the Chinese translation of the Soviet term comrade and widely used in Socialist China, as far from a People’s Republic activist invention (70-72). Such sentiment manifests, I think, most strongly in the claim that *tongzhi* retains a subversive calling to a utopian promise of socialism, when in fact early *tongzhi* activism by gay men was quickly appropriated by the state during the 90s and early 2000s, in the wake of the AIDS crisis. The social implications of comradeship have been questioned by scholars like Haiyan Lee. The effort to construct a local lineage is baked into this rhetorical move to append socialist era names, tropes, and cultural products. The historicity of “socialism” has been hollowed out. Behind this is a breaking narrative that refuses to consider how state socialism provides material infrastructure for China’s subsequent economic liberalization and capitalist expansion. This move cannot achieve its force except through an act of abstraction that subtracts historicity from temporality and collapses the past into contemporaneity. What *Tongzhi* and other signifiers perform in post-socialist discursive fields often falls short of realization.

On the other hand, recent discussions of the term *tongzhi* from Sinophone studies by Chi Ta-wei and Howard Chiang, while powerfully demonstrating *tongzhi*’s Sinophone inflection via Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, tend to elide how its contemporary fate cannot but get entangled with a burgeoning queer culture in the Peoples Republic of China (PRC). Such ironic “obsession with China,” ignoring also the fact that Taiwan remains an important regional *center* rather than margin

of queer culture, demands reflection. Chi in a recent entry to *Keywords of Taiwan Theory* on Ku'er (the translation of "queer") has gone as far as rejecting *tongzhi* as bowing down to "China" and opts instead for the more radical *ku'er*:

No matter how Maike, Lin Yihua, and others parody the word "tongzhi" of modern China, they nonetheless have to borrow (from China's existing vocabulary) the old "tongzhi" to fight for the legitimacy of the new "tongzhi"; after all, "tongzhi" is definitely easier on the ear compared to "tongxinglian [homosexual]." However, "ku'er" rejects the legitimacy conferred by Greater China; it only strives for Western tongzhi movement's legitimacy, for the talisman of "queer" ("Ku'er" 318).

It is ironic that, in the course of a passage that strives to affirm the radicality of queer in contradistinction to the inherent conservatism of *tongzhi*, Chi has to rely on the signifier *tongzhi* to articulate the appropriate sense of queerness in the last sentence ("Western *tongzhi* movement"). This rhetorical slippage that aligns *tongzhi* with queer when it is qualified by "Western" recurs throughout the essay. Such a hierarchy structures the pages. One wonders why, compared to ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, and diasporic Chinese who are easily rallied under Sinophone banners, queers are somehow assumed to inhabit hegemonic Chineseness effortlessly and unproblematically. The transparency of ethnicity as an identity marker remains a structuring motivating assumption of Sinophone studies, threatening to implode the whole project from within. Shared across the Taiwan Strait is an unwillingness to cross sedimented geopolitical borders. Behind such refusals is a witting disavowal of how *tongzhi* was and has never been a hermetically sealed concept, but rather a wish to recuperate the local shadowed by the "homoglobal," somehow ineluctably different and resistant. The point is not so much that it is necessary to queer the Sinophone by way of categorial expansion and inclusion, as is currently practiced; rather, a queer perspective might fundamentally dislocate the Sinophone.

Extant engagements with queer theory from within Sinophone and China studies have tended to stake their interventions in a claim to the idea of "locality," asking "why does queer theory need China?", or "why queer theory needs Sinophone studies." Often the claim boils down to how an unreflected notion of difference informing the epistemological playing field. The claim then goes on to *substantiate* particularized differences as departure point en route to a more contextually sensitive reading. *Why*, indeed, does queer theory need Sinophone Studies, need

Taiwan, need China? Even as they offer much needed correctives to “the uneven history of LGBTQ experience around the world,” they continue to be mired in the churning engine of an *a priori* difference (3). These particularized geographical, ethnic, and cultural differences, that is, continue to magnetize Area Studies’ relation to the disciplines.

Chiang has recently proposed an answer in his monograph *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* by turning to universalism. In a way resonant with *The Membranes* and 90s intellectual landscape at large, Chiang asks the following rhetorical question. “What if transgenderism is not the exception but the norm by which all embodied subjects can be measured and understood?” (22). From here on, he makes a heroic stride to take the trouble out of gender and proposes a continuum model of sexuality in order to capture and streamline the complexity of human experience. He does so, in yet another surprising turn of events, by recuperating the work of the eugenicist endocrinologist Harry Benjamin who is widely recognized in the literature as *the* figure behind enduring transphobic gatekeeping mechanisms denying people access to basic medical care. In Chiang’s own words, the book “presents transtopia as the antidote to transphobia, frames it in terms of a continuum model that accredits the diversity of queer experience, and situates the pertinence of this new vocabulary in relation to the practice of critical history” (5). “Accredit” is a telling word choice. Where does the theorist accrue the authority to sanction and recognize lived experiences? Implicit here is a deep, uncritical alignment with the sexological enterprise. As Joan Scott has long argued in “The Evidence of Experience,” “experience is at once pre-existing interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted” (797). By universalizing “transgenderism,” much like his forebear Harry Benjamin, Chiang attempts to re/pro/duce transgender as an inclusionary stabilizing conceptual category.

Judith Butler has over the years attempted to propose a more nuanced vision of universality. In their response to a dossier published in *The Journal of Asian Studies* that reflects on the itinerancy of *Gender Trouble* in Asian Studies, rightly taking Anglophone (conceptual) monolingualism to task, Butler argues for the necessity of grounding gender in a notion of translation:

For far too long, those working in Euro-American frameworks have assumed that whatever is said about gender is true if it is conceptually clear

within those vocabularies and grammars. They have (we have) failed to note that gender itself is an English coinage, emerging in the 1950s, that does not always travel well, and which meets resistance for reasons that are not always suspect. If a theory of gender seeks to be generalizable, then it has to pass through translation. And when it takes that passage, the very concept of gender changes—or fails—by virtue of the inflections and usages that are part of other idioms and languages (975-976).

Denise Ferreira da Silva has acutely asked: why “[would] open and fluid local cultures ... need translation and how [have] these ‘linguistic borders’ ... been produced” (6)? Translation, as we know, does not happen between two languages but establishes the very identity of particulars. That is, rather than supplementing a certain content by multiplying pre-determined positions of enunciations, translation undermines the self-identity of any given position. The lesson translation imparts is not about pluralizable differences but difference as such. Moreover, both Chiang’s and Butler’s investments on the discursivity of gender make a leap from changing concepts of gender to claims on ontology, the difference being that while Chiang ultimately sides with the plenitude of language in the form of sexological knowledge, Butler insists on the signifiatory drift albeit with a multicultural spin. What either theorist cannot contemplate is the psychoanalytic insight that sexual difference inhabits language as its *limit*. That is, sexual difference is impossible, not because our knowledge is incomplete (Chiang) or its meaning is unstable (Butler). Rather, it is its impossibility of completing meaning, the site at which every symbolic inscription fails.

Cyborgian Goddess

Such is the conceptual field that *tongzhi* has been inserted into and of which *The Membranes* is a part given its canonical status as an early instantiation of *tongzhi* literature in Taiwan. When it comes to the scholarly reception of the novella, one transgressive edge appears in the figure of cyborg and tactic of blurring boundaries. In her groundbreaking 1985 “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late 20th Century,” an essay also widely circulated and read then in Taiwan feminist and queer intellectual circles, Donna Haraway argues that new technological and scientific discourses like “molecular genetics, ecology, sociobiological evolutionary theory, and immunobiology” have brought profound challenges to Western models of subjectivity and provided a ground upon which to

reformulate women's identities (34). The cyborg comes to the foreground as a figure fundamentally challenging sets of traditional binaries of "mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized" (32). For Haraway, the cyborg embodies a unique possibility to forge a different kind of socialist feminist politics resisting intertwined logics of identity, technophobia, and essentialism.

Scholars like Dianne Currier have since questioned the logic of identity animating the essay's central tactic of blurring boundaries. "Within Haraway's work in the formulation of the cyborg a body pre-exists as a singular entity, to which a range of technological artifacts and/or processes are appended, which then reformulate that body and its associated identity beyond the bounds of conventional categories of Human or Man (···) in a formula the posits them as initially discrete categories" (323). That is, the cyborg's "difference is accounted for as variation or mutation, that is in a relation to a central figure, the Human, in a reiteration of the logic of identity" (324).

While the cyborg no longer commands the heady cultural appeal it once did, recent years continue to bear witness to the popularity of this figure. Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* (Huangchao, 2013) and Rupert Sanders's 2017 filmic remake of *Ghost in the Shell* being but two examples. Fran Martin has astutely contextualized *The Membranes* within the *yin/xian* (concealment/disclosure) dialectic of 1990s Taiwan *tongzhi* (literally "comrade"; appropriated by gay rights activists beginning in the 80s to signify LGBTQ people) movement withholding truth and facticity of the *tongzhi* subject. thus resisting giving in to disciplinary and injurious public gaze. For Martin, "the logic of the prosthetic body part (...) problematizes identity by throwing into question the possibility of corporeal integrity (...) the missing inward 'self' is symbolized in the also-absent integrated organic body" (205). Infinitely peelable, the membrane figures the impossibility of authenticity required of the subject of homosexuality. Yet what about the brain? Such a reading also seems to ignore the fact that within the story's economy, M-skin, the transparent artificial membrane-skin Momo applies on her clients, is very much a surveillance technology that enables access to and indeed divulges Momo's subjective truth. The horror of Momo's discovery, I think, is as much about being deluded as about the fact that her sense of self persists in spite of the collapse of her world and body. This points to the persistence of interiority.

The Membranes, as many commentators have already noted, is a pastiche rife with references to its artistic and intellectual forebears and contemporaries. From Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage to Pedro Almodóvar's *High Heels*, from Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata* to Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, from Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* to Derridean *différance*, the novella assembles a microcosm of late 20th century global high culture. Written during a time of great cultural agitation and transformation, the work is itself a testament to the "promiscuous literacy," to borrow a phrase from Heinrich, of that generation of post-martial-law Taiwanese writers. It was not only those marked as *Tongzhi* who boldly absorbed the influx of artistic works and actively experimentation with new literary themes and styles. To quote Heinrich at some length:

As Chi notes in the preface to a new edition of *The Membranes*, the book itself "is like a cyborg body ... made of disparate parts [including] intertextual and extratextual allusions and references, primarily from imported films, literature, theory, art, and music, without which the story simply wouldn't work." (...) *The Membranes* was not meant to broadcast the author's erudition. Rather, like a primitive hyperlink, it offered readers connection to some of the key source texts that informed its production (142).

The names that populate the story might appear anachronistic to us today in 2023, yet they are equally out of joint with present contexts set in futuristic 2100. On the one hand, these references no doubt offer a clue or two about the writing of the novel and the vibrancy of a post-martial-law literary landscape in Taiwan. On the other hand, they hint at Chi's context of writing as well as his influences as they telegraph a certain flattening of time where anachronism can no longer be. What their apparent anachronism indicates within the narrative economy of the story is precisely the elimination of temporal difference with the development of digital and cyborgian technologies.

Implicit here is a certain gesture of evacuation. Even as we know how extradiegetically the high culture invocations, as Heinrich notes, (in)form parts of the skeleton of the novella, their on-screen presence in the plot simultaneously empties out any such significance. Indeed, as Chi himself puts it, "the book itself is like a cyborg body." And just like having or not having body parts bears little consequence upon Momo's subjectivity, these floating cultural names from the past

play no significant narrative function. Each is serially substitutable. The goal is then not to retrace steps back to a foregone conclusion offered by the text itself. In *The Historical Novel*, György Lukács writes of Sir Walter Scott: “It is certain that Scott had no knowledge of Hegel’s philosophy and had he come across it would probably not have understood a word” (30). The task of the critic set forth is essentially to bring out and reconstruct the underlying philosophy. Yet with theoretically savvy contemporary writers like Chi, who consciously incorporate theories and ideas into the stories, what can the critic say that is not already anticipated by the text itself? How are we to read *The Membranes* otherwise? The brain, that detested Cartesian thinking is, I propose, one way into the novella’s articulations of gender and sexuality.

Brain Adrift

“In Mother’s hands lay a crystal box. The box was equipped with a delicate network of tubes that fed an autonomous life-support system. In the box lay an organ, pink and soft: Momo” (116). We do not meet Momo’s brain in its exquisite yet brute state until ten chapters into the book. We do, however, inhabit it, for the narrative stays inside Momo’s head as she recounts her childhood, working as an esthetician and puzzling over her mother’s alienation from her. Though the mystery is not unveiled until much later, we are given very early on clues as to the untrustworthiness of Momo’s reality and its unusual enigma-ridden state. “Salon Canary” is the name of Momo’s establishment and the fact that Momo rarely if ever goes out already suggests a state of captivity. This is further echoed by mysterious words of Momo’s childhood friend Andy, who said to Momo that “you are a canary in a cage” during her surgery (44). Andy turns out to be this very cage – it is an android manufactured by ISM to replace Momo’s virus-defeated body. The clue is there all along.

It is interesting to note here the labor Momo – or rather, her brain – is contracted to perform. The narrator reports that:

Momo’s job consisted of inspecting M units that had been sent in for repair and restoring their surfaces, applying lubricants, and replacing various components. This was crude work that could normally be handled by a common android, but when it comes to the finely calibrated, heavy-duty M units, only a human brain—with its meticulous attention to detail—would

suffice. This was where Momo's brain came in. (124).

In the factory of ISM Enterprises, it is not an enhanced body put to work, as is often the case with cyborg imaginaries. Instead, it is Momo's brain that is committed to a labor it has not consented to and remains unaware of. This whole procedure is realized through the act of consumption, whereby Momo is manipulated to believe that she is offering dermal care when in actuality she is performing the repetitive and tedious work of repair on war droids. With its ring of "deity," ISM, the name of the conglomerate, can be, we are told, "found in many of the world's more provocative hegemonic concepts (...) such as imperialism, colonialism, capitalism" and so on (118). Therefore, the corporation stands in literally for the basket of hegemonic ideologies as such, from which the sustenance of the cyborg body cannot be extricated.

In the story's reversal of the conventional logic of machines supplementing the organic body, the human brain becomes the supplement to the artificial cyborg shell. Having a brain, the cyborg remains cyborg instead of backsliding into android robot. The brain's retained role, despite the fact that all other body parts have become technologically reproducible in the novella's highly developed world, is still fungible. The ISM Enterprises manager Draupadi informs us they continue to have access to fresh supplies of human brains to navigate the cyborg bodies. ISM's operation appears to literalize the classic account of false consciousness in which people are seized by ideological illusions and thus put to power's ends. The twist is that with the brain automatized as a technical part within the cybernetic feedback loop, even consciousness is not required for the work Momo performs. In the narrative world, experience, aligned strictly with falsity, cannot be the ground of the authentic self. The novella's English translator Ari Larissa Heinrich makes an interesting observation: "while Momo's lived experiences are revealed one after another to be fiction, the *reality* of her emotions in *The Membranes* is never questioned" (144). For Heinrich then, Momo's emotions bear the weight of her authenticity even in the wake of her body and life-world's disintegration.

Emotion is the human's last defense in grounding itself in the birth story of a cyborg imaginary. The cyborg (short for "cybernetic organism"), as Ian Hacking traces, was first conceived by two Americans, Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline, in 1960 as an offshoot of a NASA commission to "do something

psychopharmaceutical for astronauts.” For the two, “the purpose of the Cyborg is to provide an organization system in which such robot-like problems are taken care automatically and unconsciously, leaving man free to explore, to create, to think, and to feel” (“Canguilhem amid the Cyborgs” 209). Later in 1970, upon solicitation from the journal *Astronautics* for an essay, Clynès asks, ‘how can man be authentic in space?’” His answer is that “human beings must express emotions” and Senticis, in which one listens to a tape that includes “names of certain emotions uttered at random intervals.” This is his solution. “You *thought* these emotions, expressing them on your face (...) so you came to *feel* the emotions. At the end of a session, the subject felt calm and relaxed, having lived out a full emotional life.” Thus explains Hacking and Clynès’s remarkable theory about how cyborgs could remain human (210-11). Clynès’s insistent Cartesianism is hard to miss. While *The Membranes* does not treat emotion as a function of thinking, it nonetheless converges with Clynès’s imagination in that emotion is figured as an inalienable part of the subject’s interiority. The very search for authenticity is itself an insistent process of interiorization.

It is interesting to note at this point the narrative voice’s transition from Momo’s subjective point of view to that of Mother. The supersession happens at the end of chapter 9 where Momo discovers herself to be performing—that is, discovering herself to be discovering—what is already scripted out by Mother. Is it not odd that the narrative even refuses to give the grand revelation over to contingency, even nominally? Subsequently Momo’s narrative perspective is lost to that of Mother, from whom we become privy to the larger backdrop of Momo’s story, while Momo, erased within a single stroke, remains forever excluded from the whole truth of her life. Indeed, how could Momo, forever trapped in the Platonic cave, ever find out? The (longing for the) maternal then comes into the picture as last line of defense against an encroaching world. This is the only thing that Momo cannot be bereaved of. Moreover, Mother chooses at the end to opt Momo out of a new cyborg body and to keep her as a brain feeding on discbooks to live a curated life protecting her from the truth, such that she can “live forever in her mind, beautiful and whole” (129).

In a recent interview with *The Paris Review* in the wake of the English translation of his Novella, Chi thus reflects on his work: “I consciously built a world mostly of women in *The Membranes*, for I was already aware in the nineties that many science fiction narratives were criticized for their sexist presumptions—many treated female

characters as accessories or sex toys for male heroes. I was so embarrassed by the sexism that I decided not to reproduce the male dominance in *The Membranes* (“Never Prosthetic”). This desire is paralleled in the narrative by the apparent ease with which Momo rids herself of her penis on a whim: “so Momo lifted up her skirt and told Andy to eat her little pee-pee. She didn’t like it anyway. It was just an annoying bit of flesh” (46). In fact, gender becomes entirely voluntarist, disembodied, and self-predicating in the story. All that is left of Momo is a brain. The obvious Cartesian fantasy notwithstanding, what is curious is that to substitute for a male dominated science fictional universe, Chi conjures up a normative vision of the maternal as a therapeutic for an overdetermined world.

In fact, the prominence of the maternal is a theme repeatedly emphasized by the author himself. In a conversation with Ari Larissa Heinrich and Michael Berry hosted by UCLA, Chi presents “non-normative parenting” as a central theme of the novella and connects *The Membranes* to Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2021 novel *Klara and the Sun* in which an android with great mimetic faculty is brought into the family to potentially replace an ailing daughter in the possible event of her death (“The Membranes and Queer Literature”). Chi points out the non-normativity of the parental structure not being a heterosexual nuclear family. Nonetheless, the fact that Momo is the product of a lesbian couple does not quite address the structural invocation of and reliance on maternal authenticity in the story. The way maternity saturates the story is evident in the detail that on the very second page of the novella, Momo’s relation to the world is referred to as a fetus “suspended in an amniotic sac” (2). Across her many virtual and real incarnations, Mother, to whom Momo’s emotional authenticity is displaced, provides a primitive origin story, a phantasmatic object of attachment, and a figure of unflagging love and sacrifice. Less an archetype of a queer parent, Mother is the very product of the phallogocentric mother-child dyad.

The convergence of a parody of normative heterosexuality with the conventionally feminine complicates any queer program that might be attached to the story. As Jean Baudrillard says, “when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6). Femininity in the guise of the maternal is part of novella’s strategy of the real. It is the gift that keeps giving. Jasbir Puar quips with Haraway’s famous line “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess”: “certainly it sounds sexier, these days, to lay claim to being a cyborg, rather than as a goddess. But why disaggregate the two when there surely must be cyborgian

goddesses in our midst?” (63). Puar’s task of supplementing (in the Derridean sense) intersectionality with assemblage is not one immediately relevant to the purview of this essay. The image of a cyborgian goddess—the coupling of feminine nature with a technologically overdetermined culture—resonates deeply with novella.

However, is Mother really as loving as she appears? Isn’t there something monstrous about a possessing mother who would not let her child out of her womb?

“Besides sounding like ‘peach’ in Japanese, ‘Momo,’” Mother explains, “also sounds a lot like the English word ‘memo,’ which is a kind of booklet for recording things you need to remember. There are many things you don’t need to write down, things that are not easily forgotten. But people still need memos to help track of their memories” (134). She goes on, “Momo, please believe me when I tell you that Mommy really loves you, really really loves you...” (134). What is Momo a trace of? A difficulty arises here when one recognizes that the longing for Mother cannot be disentangled from the discbooks scripted by Mother herself. The M-skin plot where Momo discovers to her horror that the very present she is living in is predetermined by Mother shows how the maternal image is very much of Mother’s own making. Much like with Clynes’s emotion, the maternal does not need a proper object (“daughter”) to be. Rather, the object does not precede but is a product of the maternal.

The monstrosity of the maternal love reveals its full self in the final section of the novella where the narrative perspective returns once more to that of Momo:

She was also dressed as a harlequin. On her face she wore the most traditional of crying masks, but on her head there was something rather unique. Mounted on the crown of her head was a delicate birdcage, and in the birdcage was a canary. The bird didn’t sing, nor did it hop about; it was as though sound asleep in a dark cave of sweet dreams.

The people had all gone far away.

Momo didn’t know where she should go. Which bridge should she cross, towards which piazza? Or should she get off the arc of the little bridge, remove her mask, and draw some water to wash her face?

As she hesitated, she heard a familiar voice calling to her.

It was Mother. She was walking toward Momo in slow motion, like in an

old movie. In the *special effects* for this scene, Mother's eyes are wet.

And there was a canary perched on the crown of Mother's head too, also locked in a cage. Meanwhile, the fog lingered over the city's rivers like a fine white membrane.

Momo, we can go home now, Mother said. *You haven't been home in so very, very long.* (136; my emphasis)

The last line of the novella is in fact directly culled from the first discbook Mother has scripted for Momo to consume, a line repeated and murmured multiple times throughout the narrative by both Momo and Mother. In this line are congealed both the maternal and the longing for the maternal. Here in the space and intimacy of this line it whispers, and Momo and Mother, both represented as canaries in a cage, meet. In this cinematic scene, even the subject of the maternal (Mother) can be dispensed with. The mother and the daughter are both figments of a floating, unattached affect, a special effect with no substance that lures, a poetic temptation seeking its next prey. Behind the nostalgic lure of the maternal is a sublime state of passivity. The whole fictional universe is a womb. To see the world functioning independent of us—the fascination with the maternal is finally, to borrow from Baudrillard, “a fantasy of a world without us,” in which we have not been born (“Violence of the Virtual and Integral Reality”).

Our analysis has moved from the interiority of Momo's brain, now stopping at the alluring mirage of the maternal. Or perhaps, this very movement only returns us to a non-movement, for isn't the maternal an “ism”? ISM's headquarter, unlike the rest of the human world that has retreated to the underwater dome/womb in fear of ultraviolet radiation, is located on the earth's surface. It is the literal and metaphorical outside of *The Membranes'* story-world, the origin and the limit of humanity, and also the place where Momo and Mother are suspended at the edge of knowing. We never learn for whom or for what cause ISM is producing all the war-droids. Is it not ironic that the dystopian underworld is but an “ism” it is created to escape from?

Note the formal repetition of even narrative ironies. In the final analysis, then, the repeated gesture of self-undermining is part and parcel of what defines the maneuvers of story-world's staging of hyperreality. Its mise-en-abyme structure accentuates the novella's own formal organization. The hyperreal world, as Baudrillard demonstrates,

is one that keeps building models of itself. Disneyland, Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World—they are “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real” when they are simply all of “real” America (*Simulacra and Simulation* 12). In other words, fiction has become the reality principle. It is from within fiction that one writes out the difference between reality and fiction whereby fiction promises a return to the real. Reflexivity, everywhere staged in *The Membranes*, is the hallmark of the text’s hyperreality’s formal maneuver and rhetorical infrastructure. In the end, it is the endless differentiations between the real and the fictional, of presenting a version of itself (Momo’s reality), dismantling it (Mother’s reality), and repeating the whole procedure again ad infinitum—the unremitting copying not of some original but of the very distinction between the original and the copy, of difference—that organizes the narrative structure.

Conclusion: Difference Without Ground

The hollowed-out ground on which *The Membranes*’ staged transgressions stand returns us to the methodological stakes of queer utopia. Even as he assembles better objects to identify with in the name of futurity for the sustenance of the present, Muñoz is acutely cognizant of the prospect of disappointment, for it is guaranteed by his totalistic rejection of the here and now. The risk of the object’s disintegration is always there. Much like how in the novella Momo’s world requires constant rescripting, repair is an adaptive task of management. In a way, the utopian wish to assemble part-objects into a whole is not unlike the incessant reflexive movement of differentiation that founds the story’s reality. Both are invested in an imaginary of aesthetic unity striving to make the objects work as a maternal holding environment. Yet unlike Muñoz’s utopian queer and Sedgwick’s reparative reader anxiety subtending one’s relation to the object (disappointment) even as one works to mitigate it, in *The Membranes* anxiety arises with the over-proximity between the mother and daughter. We feel claustrophobia sucking out any room (to desire) for the daughter. Herein lies the crux. The primary drama of fine-tuning object-relations in queer utopia is revealed here as a secondary effect of a prior disavowal of its stabilizing investments.

Reading through a range of texts, this essay has attempted to put under erasure the utopian impulse towards stabilizing conceptual categories, be it sexual identity,

history, or area, *and* to stay with the queer provocation insistent on a hermeneutic without ground. If as Lee Edelman argues, queerness, in its status as a catachresis, names the primal negativity of groundless ground from which we must proceed, then instead of filling out its “nothing” with the meaningfulness of conceptual determination, we might want to read along the grain for a limit that is constitutive of discourse while resisting its closure. Dare we face the challenge of difference without resorting to the intelligibility of differences? Such seems to be the enduring question queer utopia has put forward for us to contend with.

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