Towards A Cyborg Poetics:
Race, Technology, and Desire in Asian American Science Fiction Poetry

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CONTENT WARNINGS

Discussion of sexual violence throughout
Discussion of suicide (pages 66-68)
Mention of chemical castration (pages 24 and 55)
Science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in the vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story.

Ursula K. Le Guin
Introduction

There are hundreds of videos on the internet of machines learning to perform basic human functions: walking, running, dancing. Much in the way an infant stumbles its way into motion, the artificial intelligence (AI) flails color-coded limbs and muscles into accidental compliance; often, the end result is only “walking” by a technicality. It is a homely, awkward perfectibility—the mocking culmination of centuries of cutting edge research. In Franny Choi and Sally Wen Mao’s poetry, the Asian cyborg is an equally vicious spectacle. Painfully aware of its prescribed role as pleasure/horror object for white American consumption, it corrodes and dismantles language, and, among the ruins, imagines a future beyond the fabricated bifurcations of subject and object. The cyborg learns to speak like AI learns to walk: a stumbling desperation turned gleaming and inhuman.

*Soft Science* by Franny Choi and *Oculus* by Sally Wen Mao are part of a growing body of work by Asian and Asian American writers responding to depictions of a hypertechnological Asian-dominated future. Notable pieces range from fiction (*The Salt Fish Girl* by Larissa Lai) to graphic novels (the *Monstress* series by Marjorie Liu), but I am particularly interested in the way that poetry as genre and method is uniquely suited to discourses of the cyborg. How do poetic techniques such as form, rhythm, and syntax coalesce to produce a deeper understanding of the role of speculative literature in constructing the popular mythologies? And how do such mythologies inform material stratifications of power such as race and gender? Ultimately, I argue, poetry offers a uniquely effective way to explore how desire, the mechanics of language,
and technologies of the self collide with the Asian cyborg’s racialized past and speculative future.

Franny Choi is a queer Korean American poet and author of *Floating, Brilliant, Gone* (2014), *Death By Sex Machine* (2017), and *Soft Science* (2019). Featuring many of the poems from the chapbook *Death By Sex Machine*, Choi’s book *Soft Science* lives in the uncomfortable overlap between technology and desire. Central to the collection is a series of poems formatted around the Turing Test, a line of questioning intended to determine whether or not a machine has developed intelligence; the story of the test’s creator, Alan Turing, subtextually shapes the narratives of queer desire in *Soft Science*. Throughout the book, Choi tackles various cyborgs and robots of popular culture: Chi from *Chobits*, Kyoko from *Ex Machina*, animated shokushu actors.

Like *Soft Science*, Sally Wen Mao’s *Oculus* is particularly interested in representations of the Asian cyborg. Sally Wen Mao is a Chinese American poet and author of two collections, *Mad Honey Symposium* (2014) and *Oculus* (2019). *Oculus* draws parallels between historical and futuristic technological representations of East Asians. Mao’s collection features a series of persona poems as twentieth century Chinese American actress Anna May Wong, imagining her as a time-traveler to the present and future. True to its title, *Oculus* explores how variants of the image (spectacle, photo, livestream) mediated through differing methods of visuality (eye, camera, oculus) cultivate particular racialized and gendered relationships. Both *Soft Science* and *Oculus* fall under the genre of science fiction poetry (sometimes called speculative poetry), which is distinguished by themes of the fantastical and technological future. Many notable works of science fiction poetry reinvent common science fiction tropes in order to interrogate the ways in which these tropes are encoded into material reality. *Soft Science* and *Oculus* in particular
interrogate American speculative fiction narratives in which Asian women are mechanized and, inversely, in which cyborgs and other technological beings of the future are racialized and gendered as Asian and female. By situating Asian femininity in the complicated space between human and machine, this process of mechanization and automatization reinforces projects of white supremacy and patriarchy which depict Asian women as the passive, natural, and robotic recipients of white sexual violence.

A joint reading of *Soft Science* and *Oculus*, I believe, opens doors to a greater understanding of not only both collections and the works they respond to, but also of the larger complexities within conversations about race, technology, and gender. More importantly, however, it can better facilitate an inquiry into possibilities of joy and liberation for the cyborg beyond the restrictions of liberal humanist subjecthood. Within the confines of a prescribed and programmed future, ask *Soft Science* and *Oculus*, what does it mean for an Asian cyborg to want? To be wanted? The central goal of this paper is to challenge existing mythologies of the cyborg through a close reading of Asian American poetry. Reading *Soft Science* and *Oculus* in conversation with each other and, more importantly, creating a shared theoretical scaffolding that elevates understandings of the interplay between race, gender, and technology reveals an alternative method of discussing the Asian cyborg—one which neither relegates the cyborg to trope and spectacle nor isolates it from its fraught sociohistorical context.

*Techno-Orientalism & the Asian Cyborg*
A portmanteau of “cybernetic organism,” a cyborg can be broadly defined as a being with both biological and technological components. For the purposes of this thesis, I am also including within this definition any machine that takes on the characteristics of an organism and any organism which takes on the characteristics of a machine. In popular culture, cyborgs are frequently represented as humans who have been technologically modified to gain physical or cognitive abilities beyond the natural. Robots, androids, and artificial intelligence are typically conceived as fully mechanical and categorized separately from the cyborg. Despite this, I am not particularly invested in strict rules of physicality. Though some of the cyborgs in the following chapters might technically be considered robots because they have no organic parts, I am including them in discussion of the cyborg because, I argue, any machine which engenders doubt about whether or not it is truly a machine becomes humanized. In other words, I believe both a machine and a human can become a cyborg contextually without changes to the physical body. Within discourses of the cyborg, it is vital to understand that mechanization and humanization are both strategic cognitive processes used to enforce global stratifications of power such as white supremacy and patriarchy, etc.

Techno-Orientalism refers broadly to hypertechnological imaginings of Asia, often manifested as speculative representations of a future in which technology is the method with which Asia secures both cultural and economic domination. While techno-Orientalist narratives frequently appear in science fiction narratives (Blade Runner, Neuromancer, Cloud Atlas), they are also pervasive outside the scope of fiction. Exaggerated fears of Chinese surveillance, hyperdigital depictions of Japan, and portrayals of North Koreans as brainwashed and robotic all constitute strategic techno-Orientalist imaginings which construct Asia as threatening a

1 That which is “cybernetic” can be understood as related to the pursuit of automated communication and control, applied to both nonliving machines (e.g. computers) and living organisms.
hypertechnological future in order to position America as the architect of freedom and progress. The naturalization of violence against Asians is not merely a side effect of techno-Orientalism; it is a key purpose.

Though techno-Orientalist narratives experienced a significant intensification in the last two decades of the twentieth century, Euro-American depictions of a hypertechnological Asia are not a recent phenomenon. From the 1932 film *The Mask of Fu Manchu* in which the Chinese antagonist is portrayed as a tech-hungry mad scientist to World War II representations of Japan as purveyors of dangerous weapons, technology has played a significant historical role in manufacturing consent for American aggression against Asia.

In conversation with Edward Said’s Orientalism, techno-Orientalism is, in part, the imperial core’s response to Asian economic ascendancy in a rapidly globalizing world; a hyper technological East Asia provides a narrative of progress that the imperial core can measure itself against. Just as in Orientalism, where “The Orient has helped to define Europe (the West)”, the techno-Orient is central to defining America as the true engineers of a progressive future (Saïd 9). As seminal techno-Orientalist scholars David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu argue, “Whereas Orientalism, as a strategy of representational containment, arrests Asia in traditional, and often premodern imagery, techno-Orientalism presents a broader, dynamic, and often contradictory spectrum of images, constructed by the East and West alike, of an ‘Orient’ undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformations” (3). The technology of Europe and America is liberating, enlightened, and benevolent only because the technology of East Asia is perceived in contrast as dangerous, restrictive, and bastardized. In other words, only the imperial core can properly “use” technology, and all “competing” forces are themselves made into a form of technology to be instrumentalized in the American pursuit of empire and capital.
Techno-Orientalism is an extension of the American project of hegemony, adapted to and determined by the neoliberal flow of power in the post-industrial world. “If the Orient was invented by the West,” writes Toshiya Ueno, “then the Techno-Orient was also invented by the world of information capitalism” (quoted by Roh et al. 228). Thus, the techno-Orient lies at the intersection of modernity’s contradictions.

Within the project of techno-Orientalism, Asians are often represented as robotic or inhuman—their own form of technology to be used or misused. Such depictions are not new, and have historically been presented as evidence to justify unequal and unfair treatment of Asian laborers from as early as the nineteenth century. The particular cyborg I am discussing in this thesis is racialized as Asian, either explicitly or through subtext and implication. The Asian cyborg, then, refers to either Asian people (in this case, particularly Asian women) who are mechanized or machines/robots/cyborgs who are racialized as Asian. Portraying Asian women as robotic or cybernetic facilitates an intensification of existing tropes and stereotypes. Within structures of white supremacy and patriarchy, Asian women are already fetishized as naturally hypersexual and submissive, and to consider these traits not only a biological inclination but technological programming further cements the centrality of white fantasy. Key to hypertechnological representations of Asian women is the complete irrelevance of consent. In fact, Asian women (and, by extension, the Asian cyborg) are epistemically disadvantaged—they are not construed as bearing credible knowledge of their own body and desires. White desire itself is considered consent enough for the Asian cyborg, whose sole purpose is to fulfill and enact white fantasies of hypersexual submission. Paradoxically, the Asian cyborg is at once distinctly hyperfeminized and deprived of womanhood, a projection and extension of white
American caricatures of Asianness. When discussing the Asian cyborg, then, the fields of race, gender, and desire are all at stake.

The cyborg is not a new field of study for techno-feminist and posthumanist scholars. In “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” for example, Donna Haraway presents the cyborg as an alternative mythology towards building an inclusive feminist practice. “In the tradition of ‘Western’ science and politics,” she argues, “the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination” (Haraway 66). The cyborg’s potential as a feminist method, argues Haraway, stems from its inherent inclination to blur and confuse boundaries (those between the organism and the machine and between human and animal). While Choi and Mao certainly respond in part to canonical discourses of the cyborg like Haraway’s, they are also grounded in the material reality of East Asian women in which mechanization is often used to naturalize white supremacist notions of hypersexuality. In Soft Science and Oculus, the cyborg is not a myth or method, but rather—as I argue in the final chapter—a collaborator in the process of producing a cyborg poetics.

Though South and Southeast Asia are not excluded from techno-Orientalist narratives, I am primarily focusing on depictions of the East Asian cyborg. As both Choi and Mao are East Asian poets, I believe superimposing the specific representations of the East Asian cyborg onto South and Southeast Asia would reproduce the very false universals which I seek to dismantle. Thus, I use the term “East Asian” not to reify geopolitical stratifications of power but to provide clarity; from this point forward, I use “East Asian cyborg” or “poetic cyborg” specifically to refer to the cyborg in Choi and Mao’s poetry. Even within the conceptual construction of East Asia, white American representations of a hypertechnological future vary greatly. As Roh et al.
observe, China and Japan are both construed as threats to American economic dominance, “but
while Japan competes with the United States for dominance in technological innovation, China
competes with the United States in labor and production” (4). “To put it in starker terms,” they
continue, “Japan creates technology, but China is the technology” (4). Though techno-Orientalist
representations of East Asia often portray Asia and Asians as indistinguishable, depictions of
China and North Korea often feature Cold War era anti-communist rhetoric. Despite differences
in the American imagination, East Asian countries (namely China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam)
have all gained significant economic power from the last decades of the twentieth century to the
current era.

In the following chapters, I use “America” or “the United States” instead of “the West” to
refer to the forces of empire and hegemony which define narratives of Orientalism and
techno-Orientalism. When applicable, I specify “white America(n)” in order to further clarify
the racial dynamics involved. I do so for several reasons. Firstly, because both Franny Choi and
Sally Wen Mao are Asian American poets, and thus respond to America’s particular racialized
and gendered materiality. Secondly, I believe that distinctions between “East” and “West” as they
are often presented in “Western” media are fabricated with the express intent of domination.
Similarly, I believe that the term “the West” is so broad that it often renders the atrocities of
empire and white supremacy as perpetrator-less tragedies, when in reality these structures are
deliberately and violently upheld through both rhetoric and action. By pointing specifically to
America as a central site of the production of (techno)-Orientalist imaginings that both reflect
and shape the material reality of Asians and Asian Americans, I intend to add clarity and

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2 In contrast, I use “East Asia” unless I am referring to a country-specific contextual detail. This is not to reify the
amalgamation of distinct Asian cultures, but to recognize that the phenomenon of (techno-)Orientalism presents
(with allowances for the complex relationships of hegemony and whichever narrative best serves them) East Asia as
a broad category of difference.

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accuracy to my argument. This is not to say, however, that other countries in Europe and North America are not similarly invested in the maintenance of such structures; in such cases where it is necessary to refer more generally to distinctions beyond the American, I use the term “imperial core” which I have borrowed from world system theory. Unlike vague geographical signifiers like “the West,” the term “imperial core” (which includes Canada, the United States, Australia, and Western Europe) explicitly denotes relationships of hegemony and capital which define such broad distinctions as “West” and “East.”

In such cases where I use the terms “Orient” or “techno-Orient,” I am specifically referring to the construction of fetishized and Orientalized difference which becomes encoded in material action. The “Oriental other” is a fabrication of the imperial core used both historically and contemporarily to manufacture consent for aggression and violence. As Saïd argues, Orientalism “is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many reasons, there has been a considerable material investment” (Orientalism 14). Thus, while (techno-)Orientalism may deal explicitly in the fantastical, its consequences are very real.

Central to my argument are questions about haunting, subjectivity, and spectacle. If temporal and technological difference can be understood as tools of racialization, how is the cyborg situated in time? If representation without protection is merely spectacle, how do Soft Science and Oculus navigate the fraught and borders between visibility and vulnerability? Donna Haraway claims the cyborg’s boundary-blurring nature is an opportunity for posthumanist liberation—but how does this apply to Asian women, for whom the cyborg is not a choice but a trope? Perhaps most importantly, how can the cyborg open doors towards a subjecthood and recognition beyond the limits of liberal humanism?

3 For more information, see the works of Samir Amin.
My argument is broken down into three primary chapters. First, I explore the relationship between the cyborg and cyberspace. I use essays by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and David Brande to situate cyberspace within the broader cultural topography of race and late stage capitalism. Often, cyberspace is represented as an opportunity for ecstatic collective disembodiment mediated through communicative technologies, but how does this apply to Choi and Mao’s cyborgs, who are often forced into positions of violent embodiment? In the second half of the first chapter, I move on to discuss Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of the face. The faciality machine, I contend, can be understood as a method through which the boundaries of the self (i.e., the borders between “self” and “other”) can be reconceptualized as a screen. Additionally, I argue, Deleuze and Guattari’s suggestion that every face is produced alongside a corresponding landscape can elucidate the ways in which cyberspace plays a vital role in the construction of the East Asian cyborg.

In the second chapter, “Lost Futures & the Cybernetic Utopia,” I turn to questions of time and haunting. Specifically, I focus on how temporal difference can function as a narrative signifier of racial difference. In Soft Science and Oculus, the cyborg’s futuristic landscape is juxtaposed with historical constructions of East Asian women, producing an effect of temporal displacement and unease. With this in mind, I use Jacques Derrida’s concept of hauntology as a starting point of analysis for explaining the poetic cyborg’s relationship to the future, focusing on explanations of haunting as an experience of disjointed time. I continue on to Mark Fisher’s expansion of hauntology to argue that the idea of the cybernetic utopia functions as a spectral lost future to the poetic cyborg.

Finally, I pivot my analysis in the third chapter to a preliminary exploration of what it means to construct a “cyborg poetics.” Is it possible, I ask, to depict the cyborg without
replicating its confinement to spectacle and performance? Using *Soft Science* and *Oculus* as paradigm examples, I argue that Choi and Mao’s cyborg poetics relies on three key functions. First, that the narrative of unceasing progress is undermined through machine learning, which functions as a sort of malicious compliance with the mandate of perfectibility. Second, I suggest that Choi and Mao’s cyborg poetics uses visuality (the eye/oculus/camera) as a method to explore methods of subjectivity beyond the subject/object bifurcation. Finally, I argue, Choi and Mao approach language itself as a form of technology. The most poignant moments of a cyborg poetics in *Soft Science* and *Oculus* occur when language malfunctions—when it fails to adequately perform its intended function as a method of communication. A cyborg poetics offers a way to navigate the complexities of race, desire, and technology.

I turn now to the body of my argument, beginning with a conceptual introduction to cyberspace. First, however, I would like to encourage my readers to consider *Soft Science* and *Oculus* as companion pieces to this thesis—that is to say, they are strongly suggested reading. The best possible result of this project is for it to convince my friends and family to read *Soft Science* and *Oculus* so that they might share my wonder.

**Chapter One: Cyberspace & the Abstract Machine of Faciality**

*Introduction*

Media representations of hyper-technological futures often render Asian women as cyborgs, androids, robots, or holograms: late-capitalist objects of fetish that are programed for white American pleasure and spectacle. To the white American protagonist, cyberspace (and, by extension, the East Asian cyborg) represents a posthuman paradise: an opportunity to escape the
strict boundaries of the self where a safe return to reality is just risky enough to promise
adventure. For cyborgs, however, the collective utopian fantasy of cyberspace is often a place of
violence and confinement. It is true, as early posthumanism claimed, that the cyborg pushes the
limits of humanity—but these limits are defined and oriented around the white cishet male
subject. In other words, they are relevant to the East Asian cyborg only by force.

In the following chapter, I first present various relevant scholarship about cyberspace
which frames cyberspace as a central location to the construction of the techno-Orient. Namely, I
use Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s analysis of cyberspace as inherently Orientalized and David
Brande’s suggestion that cyberspace is a uniquely late-capitalist fantasy to build an
understanding of cyberspace as a virtual place which both reflects and shapes material reality.
Cyberspace, I argue, is central to fully understanding the East Asian cyborg. Second, I use Donna
Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” and Mark Fisher’s *Ghosts of My Life* to introduce and
explicate the idea that technology dissolves boundaries. I contend that Gilles Deleuze and Félix
Guattari’s idea of faciality, I contend, provides a method of analysis that enables a more nuanced
and complex understanding of Choi and Mao’s cyborg. Pairing the landscape of cyberspace with
the cyborg face elucidates the intricacies of the relationship between cyberspace and the cyborg;
the social production of the face offers an essential method for critiquing the function of
subjection in cyberspace. Finally, I present a case for reimagining the boundary between the
self and the other in cyberspace as a screen in the technological sense: exchanging “boundary”
for “screen” allows for a precision of language on three fronts (naturalization, transparency, and
fragility). Ultimately, I argue that neoliberal conceptions of the self constitute an insufficient
model for understanding Choi and Mao’s cyborg; instead, I use cyberspace-as-landscape, the
abstract machine of faciality, and the screen to propose an alternative framework of analysis.
Cyberspace

Cyberspace is a hyperreal virtual setting distinct from, but not exclusive to, the practical worlds of digital communication that characterize the modern world (e.g. the internet). The term “cyberspace” was coined by writer William Gibson in 1982 before the internet became widely popularized outside of military circles. Partially due to the internet’s widespread influence shortly after the publication of Gibson’s Cyberspace series, observes literary theorist Seo-Young Chu, “By the mid-nineties, ‘cyberspace’ had become a popular synonym for ‘the Internet,’ ‘the Net,’ and ‘the World Wide Web’... [The] Internet was widely perceived to be the materialization of Gibson’s prophetic vision” (129). Due to the close association between ‘cyberspace’ and ‘the internet,’ it is important to differentiate between the two; while both are characterized by technological communication and facilitate the collapse of space and time into a virtual space, cyberspace is a uniquely eroticized fantasy. If cyberspace is the fantastical promise of future-building technology, the internet is reality: because cyberspace is so dramatized, observes Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “The gap between cyberspace and the Internet can create dissatisfaction and a desire for something more” (“Race and Software” 307).

Though Gibson’s seminal science fiction works merely reflected the Orientalism of the late twentieth century, they undeniably shaped the American perception of East Asia and technology. Even decades after the publication of his Cyberspace series, Gibson claims that “Japan is still the future” (Gibson). From its very conception, cyberspace was coded as East Asian; Orientalism may not always be the primary function of cyberspace, but it is intimately entangled with its subliminal desirability. “Through the orientalizing—the exoticizing and eroticizing—of others,” notes Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “those imagining, creating, and
describing cyberspace have made electronic spaces comprehensible, visualizable and pleasurable” (“Orienting Orientalism” 74). It is precisely this racialization of cyberspace—its Orientalization—which has made it so desirable. In projecting a familiar “Other” (the Orient) onto the unfamiliar virtuality (cyberspace), the American imagination can once again play and replay reveries of “exploration” (read: domination) that are at once historically informed and futuristically imaginative. Cyberspace is the background on which both history and the future are rewritten to serve American capitalist interests; as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun notes, “Race was, and still is, central to conceiving “cyberspace” as a utopian commercial space” (“Race and Software” 305).

Cyberspace, claims David Brande, is the fanciful logical extreme of neoliberal ideology: limitless in resources, it provides a playground for late capitalism in which the most powerful tool of the market—the individual—is deconstructed by the very forces on which its supremacy is predicated (513). Brande argues that cyberspace (and the cyborgs that populate it) are prime examples of the unending revolutionizing of production that Marx identifies as a characteristic of the bourgeois relation to capital. “The rapidity of cultural change itself… the sense of a future that crowds the present, is one of the predominant themes of cyberpunk,” he reasons (Brande 513). Cyberspace itself becomes the setting in which the “Cartesian subject”—the Euro-American man of absolute certainty—is denatured into a fragmented cyborg consciousness, representing “an effect of changing modes and relations of production and of changes in the division of labor” (Brande 513). In this way, cyberspace embodies the neoliberal fantasy while solving its contradictions: unlike in the “real,” world, the resources (land, wealth, desired

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4 In this thesis, neoliberalism can be broadly understood as the form of late-stage capitalism which began in the early 1970s, characterized economically by austerity measures, deregulation, and privatization. It is important to note that neoliberalism has historically spread through strategic and coercive loan negotiations by transnational organizations such as the IMF and World Bank—it is inseparable from the American imperial project.
subjects) in cyberspace are limitless. Time itself is compacted in such a way that it becomes accessible as never before; it, too, becomes integral to commodity production. Cyberspace is the sandbox game of white American domination; it “ends the narratives of the end, ends narratives of postmodern/postindustrial society’s ennui and exhaustion” (Chun 80). It is, ultimately, a vital site for the construction and maintenance of late-stage capitalism.

From Brande’s argument that cyberspace is a uniquely neoliberal imagining, we can conclude that science fiction not only produces fictional mythologies, but also engineers narratives which both reflect and shape sociopolitical structures of power. Combining Chun and Brande’s analyses leads to an understanding of techno-Orientalism as both a project of empire and capital: by racializing cyberspace and its associated subjects (i.e. cyborgs) as both dangerous and desirable, America cements its role as the sole architect of “benevolent” and “liberating” technology. Simultaneously, techno-Orientalism positions American capitalism as both moral and necessary; cyberspace is a conceptual territory which America fears losing to communist (in the case of China and North Korea) or competitive (in the case of Japan and South Korea) East Asian forces. Thus, cyberspace becomes a surrogate landscape for a one-sided war in which America fights its own contradictions and ennui but believes its enemy to be East Asia. It is the (consensual) hallucination of an empire in the throes of death, haunted by the specter of its own violence. In “Posthuman Difference,” Warren Liu notes that,

Technology’s ability to (differentially) reproduce the nation even beyond the nation provides… a productive new framework for conceptualizing the ways in which a “homeland” is now something more than a discrete territory with definable borders or symbolic ideal—it is, in fact, a technology embedded within subject/objects (11).

Like race, then, nationhood is mapped onto virtuality based on global patterns of hegemony. In fiction, the East Asian “invasion” which America both fears and desires is realized not through physical battle, but through circuitry and technology. Take, for example, the cultural
domination of East Asia in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*: the threat of cyberspace comes not from *actual* invasion, but from the Asian appropriation of the (perceived) Euro-American monopoly on imagination and progress. By removing symbols of East Asianness from their “homeland” and grafting them onto virtual landscapes of fantasy, American techno-Orientalist narratives reenact imperialism and displacement. Cyborgs become nothing but symbols and metaphors, disembodied invocations of the (techno-)Orient.

*The Borders of the Cyborg*

Within techno-Orientalized narratives of cyberspace, the limits of the self are dissolved and remade. Often, narratives of technological futures provide opportunities for the white male protagonist to experience pseudo-disembodiment via digital communication or sexual interaction with the East Asian cyborg. The idea that technology facilitates the dissolution of boundaries, however, is not a new one. Various theories of modernity explore how technology has fundamentally shifted our perception of the world. In *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures*, Mark Fisher notes, “Tele-technologies collapse both space and time” (42). The unrelenting push for and profitization of progress has led to a reality which is haunted by the future (or, rather, *potential* futures). Fisher describes a function of hauntology which “refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour)” (40). The digital, then, becomes anticipatory: reflective of both fears and dreams that have not yet occurred.

While Fisher refers to the confusion of spatio-temporal boundaries through technology, Donna Haraway presents three specific sets of boundaries which the cyborg blurs, dissolves, and liberates itself from. The infamous “Cyborg Manifesto,” explains Haraway, “is an argument for
pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction” (66).

Technology is the method Haraway proposes for this confusion, and it operates on three key fronts: the borders between human/animal, organism/machine, and physical/non-physical. Ultimately, Haraway argues that feminist analysis has a moral responsibility to question the previously-assumed “dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized” (82).

Though I believe “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” is a valuable essay, its application is limited in the context of techno-Orientalism. Julia R. DeCook argues that “The identity of cyborg is indeed a privileged one”: essentially, that “cyborg” is not a political identity afforded to all (Cook). In contrast, I suggest that Haraway’s cyborg fails to take into account racialized cyborgs whose identity is not a choice but a trope. Presenting the cyborg as an exclusively liberatory force ignores the complicated politics of race and technology. The dissolution and blurring of borders (both physical and metaphorical) is a recurring theme throughout both Soft Science and Oculus: like Haraway’s cyborg, the East Asian cyborg that speaks in Choi and Mao’s poems is grounded in the destruction of boundaries. Unlike Haraway’s cyborg, however, Choi and Mao’s speaker is trapped in the so-called “freeing” space between limits.

Additionally, Haraway situates the cyborg as a methodology—as, essentially, a tool to be used by women for liberation. This is antithetical to the conception of cyborgs that I present in this thesis: I believe that Choi and Mao’s cyborg cannot fully be comprehended through a framework of “method” or “tool”. In other words, Choi and Mao’s cyborgs (as speakers of their poems) speak for themselves, while Haraway’s cyborgs (as methodology and metaphor) are spoken through.
My goal in analyzing cyborg personhood is not to “humanize” cyborgs (and by extent, East Asians) to the American eye. A mere claim for representation under the American imperial structure is incapable of providing an accurate and provoking critique of techno-Orientalism; the problem with (neo)liberal subjecthood is not its exclusivity but its hegemony—its very existence. “In order to displace orientalist dreams of cyberspace,” claims Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “we must not simply argue that others are selves too, or that everyone should have the right to be a cowboy. Rather, we must displace this disembodying binary by highlighting the ways that the self is always compromised, even within itself” (“Orienting Orientalism” 75). It is not a simple matter of East Asian (Americans) wanting to be included or excluded as a liberal subject, but of extricating these desires from their origins to examine what lies beyond the politics of representation and inclusion.

By confusing the boundaries of the self, the cyborg becomes an instrument of collectivization. It is not clear, however, whether or not this is a victory; as racialized and gendered figures, cyborgs have never experienced the autonomous Cartesian subjecthood which they purportedly negate. For cyborgs, there is no “subject”—no hero, no Ego, no dreamer lying prone on a psychoanalyst’s couch. It remains to be seen whether cyborgs, built on intimate unfamiliarity, can facilitate the destruction of a personhood which they have never experienced. I say this not to reify or mythologize neoliberal subjecthood, but rather to recognize it as an ever-impossible contradiction: when all relationships are measured in profit and commodity, personhood is unattainable for even those “controlling” the fantasy (those “jacking in” to cyberspace). As Warren Liu notes, a “unified subjectivity” was never available to marginalized subjects like the East Asian cyborg; instead, they are, “that population against which the ‘liberal human subject’ authorized itself” (Liu, “Posthuman Difference” 7). Despite (or perhaps because)
the cyborg pierces the boundary of self/other, it can never truly be a (white American) subject: cyborgs cannot be “liberated” from being human if they have never been seen as subjects in the first place.

“Turing Test_Boundaries” is the third in a series of six poems that begin each section of Franny Choi’s *Soft Science*. Alan Turing, renowned computer scientist who was ultimately chemically castrated for homosexuality, is referenced several times throughout Choi’s book, both directly (as in the Turing Test series) and indirectly (allusions to ghosts and the history of machines). Frequently featured in science fiction media like Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, the Turing Test determines whether a machine (most often computers/artificial intelligence) is capable of thinking like a human being (Deeley 1982). In using the Turing Test as a major theme in *Soft Science*, Choi is responding to both the science fiction canon and the complicated history of desire and violence.

Choi’s poem “Turing Test_Boundaries” depicts a virtuality in which violence and desire are deeply inseparable; the speaker struggles to refuse touch that is invasive and unwanted. Like the Turing Test, the poem takes the form of an interview; when the interviewer asks “// how do you know you are you and not someone else,” the speaker replies, “anywhere it doesn’t hurt / that’s where / i end” (Choi 12). Pain, then, is what allows the speaker to outline borders of the self; the utopian collective of cyberspace becomes oppressive instead of liberating.

As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun notes, the white protagonist becomes disembodied only through the embodied Orientalized subject; cyberspace is a nonplace where “you can transcend the physical limitations of your body” (“Race and Software” 308). This transcendence, often imagined as sexual interaction with an Orientalized subject, is predicated on the assumption of consent. Cyborgs, like East Asian women more broadly, are often characterized as inherently
hypersexual; techno-Orientalism, argues Chun, “promises intimate knowledge, sexual concourse with the other” (“Race and Software” 306). In “Turing Test_Boundaries,” the interviewer, violently oblivious to the speaker’s discomfort, asks, “/ does this feel good” and then, “/ can i keep going” (Choi 37). Anything other than affirmation is inconceivable; the cyborg speaker’s pain is barely considered legitimate enough to warrant a pause. In observing the relationship between racialized labor and technology, Sarah S. Lachlann Jain argues that “one way to differentiate bodies and machines is in the designation of injury and the ways in which injury both becomes thinkable and carries meaning when it does” (82). This is especially relevant in the discourse of techno-Orientalism, where the cyborg is specifically designated as inhuman—as “Other.” Anything that contradicts the programmed vocation of pleasure and desirability is automatically dismissed; as mechanical, racialized, and feminized beings, cyborgs are perceived as functionally incapable of feeling pain and their consent is violently assumed.

In “Turing Test_Boundaries,” the limits of the self are not only dissolved, but actively breached. The speaker describes experiencing the pain of another person (or, at least, a self that is so distant as to be foreign): “any face / a stranger / but they tore that / girl’s throat / & bad sounds left me / they made her dance / & my feet / were sore in the morning” (Choi 37). Far from being liberatory, this confusion of self and other is a source of discomfort to the cyborg speaker: the self, then, becomes something one is alienated from as opposed to freed from. In response to being asked “/ please state your name for the record,” the speaker offers “alien invasion” (Choi 37). This claim, I argue, is not necessarily a simple attempt at reclaiming “otherness” or “alienness”; instead, it embodies Chun’s statement that “the self is always compromised, even within itself” (“Orienting Orientalism” 75). By emphasizing the close association of violence and desire, “Turing Test_Boundaries” challenges the traditional canonical
depiction of cyberspace. A utopia for some is always a dystopia for others: where the white male protagonist of science fiction finds liberation through disembodied touch, the cyborg finds only pain. After all, claims Choi, “all things birth / their own opposites” (37).

**The Cyborg and the Abstract Machine of Faciality**

In their collection of essays *A Thousand Plateaus*, philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explain the face as a black hole on a white wall. Facialization is not a ready-made condition, they argue; rather it is manufactured by the abstract machine of faciality. The face is integral to recognition and knowledge-production—it does not function like a mirror or reflection, but rather as a process of subjectification that orients interpersonal relationships and molds political power. To facialize is to categorize, to rationalize; it “operates not by resemblance but by an order of reasons” (Deleuze and Guattari 170). “This machine is called the faciality machine,” they explain, “because it is the social production of the face, because it performs the facialization of the entire body and all its surroundings and objects, and the landscapification of all worlds and milieus” (Deleuze and Guattari 181). Ultimately, the face is the link between significance and subjectification; it is the (white male) norm against which standards of deviation are measured (and therefore condemned). “The face is not universal,” note Deleuze and Guattari, “It is not even that of the white man; it is White Man himself… the face is Christ. The face is the typical European” (176). The face, like the cyborg, is a modern myth of history that both reflects and shapes social reality.

The method Deleuze and Guattari offer for opposing the face and the rationalized meaning ascribed by the abstract machine of faciality is not necessarily *full* meaninglessness but
leaving meaning behind in favor of becoming. The tasks of the body—the dashing, the carrying, the traversing—are still being performed, but they have become subtle and secretive:

If human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine… freckles dashing toward the horizon, hair carried off by the wind, eyes you have to traverse instead of seeing yourself in or gazing into in those glum face-to-face encounters between signifying subjectivities (171).

Decoupled from their associated orifice, they are no longer tasks, but the free expression of action and interaction without borders or restraints.

It would be easy to claim that the cyborg is the antithesis to the face; that the cyborg is fully defacialized, lacking both the eyes to perceive and the subject to be recognized. This, however, subscribes to the very method of faciality that we seek to escape. The gaze of the abstract machine of faciality is constructed in binary terms: “given a concrete face, the machine judges whether it passes or not, whether it goes or not, on the basis of the elementary facial units. This time, the binary relation is of the “yes-no” type” (Deleuze and Guattari 177). By producing a false dichotomy, claiming the cyborg is a panacea to negate the process of faciality would itself reproduct the binaries integral to the discourses of faciality and neoliberalism.

I believe Deleuze and Guattari offer a unique and abstract understanding of subjecthood that can facilitate a fuller understanding of how Choi and Mao’s cyborgs are situated both within and without the discourses of cyberspace. I argue that Choi and Mao’s cyborg speaker is not necessarily opposed to the face; rather, it is intimately involved with the social production of the face. What is important is not necessarily where the cyborg is positioned in relation to the face, but how the face can be used as a method of analysis to enhance our understanding of the cyborg.
Faciality takes place in the hyper-categorization of psychoanalysis: everywhere there is a boundary, there is also a face, locking us into organized meaning. “The face constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of,” claim Deleuze and Guattari, “it constitutes the wall of the signifier, the frame or screen” (168). Thus, the face, cyberspace, and cyborgs all play vital roles in the (re)construction or destruction of boundaries. Using the face (and its corresponding landscape) as an analytical device allows us to reconceptualize the boundaries of the self as, ultimately, a screen—in the sense of a border between the visible exterior and invisible interior of technology, a blank space to be projected onto, and a transparent object of separation. By adopting the technological language of the techno-Orient (e.g., “screen”), we can produce a more relevant and nuanced critique of the promises (and failures) of cyberspace.

While the racialized cyborg that I address in this thesis is certainly not in full opposition to faciality, Donna Haraway’s cyborg appears to be. (The complication here is, as we have discussed, that Haraway’s cyborg is limited by nonuniversal conceptions of liberation.) Deleuze and Guattari claim that the face is closely associated with Christ and his many symbolic iterations. “If it is possible to assign the faciality machine a date,” they argue, it would be “the year zero of Christ and the historical development of the White Man” (182). Donna Haraway’s cyborg is (at least superficially) opposed to this: “The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden;” she writes, “it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust,” (67). Hostile to all natural forms of divinity, Haraway’s cyborg instead relishes derationalization and derives pleasure from the confusion of boundaries and time. Deleuze and Guattari’s face is origin; the beatific birth of Christ and the white man. Conversely, Haraway’s cyborg claims no natural origin; though created by the white father, it is exceedingly unfaithful to its roots (Haraway 67).
In “& O Bright Star of Disaster, I Have Been Lit,” Choi explicitly mocks the communicative nature of the face: “my face / is a game of telephone gone sour, or south,” claims the speaker (34). Facialization gives meaning and purpose to the various cartographies of the signifier: it is a map, Deleuze and Guattari argue, a method of orientation (Deleuze and Guattari 168). The cyborg speaker’s face, in contrast, is un navigable: it is body language physically displaced from understanding (“gone sour, or south”) (Choi 34). In the game of telephone, communication is broken: the ear/mouth machine is disrupted, and the signifier/subject correlation is aborted. By offering a catachrestic analysis of the cyborg face and telephone, Choi emphasizes that “Otherness” is not necessarily endemic to the cyborg speaker; rather, it is something they perform. “& isn’t that / what you paid for?” the speaker finishes, “isn’t that what you came to see? A god, on loop, failing?” (Choi 34). Unlike the ultimate face of Christ, the divinity of the cyborg speaker is perverted; it is rooted not in year zero, but in the forcible disruption and infinite repetition of time. When conceptualizing the production of the face as a constant cycle of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, however, Choi’s cyborg—looped and glitching, doomed to repetition—becomes an extreme example of facialization. In a way, it is the failed performance of “Otherness” itself that becomes the cyborg’s face: reduced to caricature (or, as we will later see, landscape), the cyborg spins on. Perhaps it is the very act of being watched which facializes the cyborg and mediates “consciousness, or passion, the camera, the third eye” (Deleuze and Guattari 168).

The face and the landscape, claim Deleuze and Guattari, are intimately connected: “All faces envelop an unknown, unexplored landscape; all landscapes are populated by a loved or dreamed-of face, develop a face to come or already past” (173). In this way, the cyborg fits neatly into the concept of faciality: it is intimately and inseparably linked with its landscape,
cyberspace. The relationship between face and landscape, observe Deleuze and Guattari, is one of deterritorialization and reterritorialization: the face and the landscape provide each other with the artifice for new territorialities (174).

The setting of cyberspace within the science fiction/cyberpunk canon often operates as a quasi-character (most often as an opponent to be “fought” or “conquered” by the white cishet male protagonist). The cyborg, then, is inseparable from its locality (cyberspace): while cyberspace is setting-made-character, cyborgs are characters-made-landscape. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun observes, narratives of cyberspace treat Orientalized subjects similarly to anthropological “explorations” of ancient civilizations: historical landscapes were approached as if they were devoid of subjects, and any people encountered “were treated as background, as relics or as proof of the degeneration of the Oriental race” (“Orienting Orientalism” 95). Objectification of the Oriental other, then, has long been a vital tool of imperialism. The close association of Asian people and their “foreign” landscape continues in cyberpunk: here, technologically altered Asian subjects are treated as “information” or data (Chun, “Orienting Orientalism” 95). East Asian cyborgs are, quite literally, part of the code that makes up virtual reality. The close association of cyberspace (landscape) and cyborg (face) hints at the possibility of the deconstruction of the Euro-American subject—a possibility which is at once feared and fetishized. The confusion of the character-setting dichotomy is the promise of exalted disorder: if only the (phone, computer, holographic) screen (the white wall) can be breached, the virtual world of the future can spill out into the present, simultaneously destroying the sense of security provided by containment and offering new possibilities for a feared and fetishized future.

Deleuze and Guattari claim that in order for the relationship between signifier and subjectification to have been established, “The black hole/whitewall system must already have
gridded \textit{all of space} and outlined its arborescences or dichotomies” [emphasis added] (179). This is vital for my understanding of cyberspace as a facialized landscape, as it explains the futility of cyberspace’s newness. Cyberspace is the virtual sandbox for reinvigorated dreams of empire and capital that rely on constant consumption and ingestion of the new: essentially, the American dream of cyberspace is an unmapped territory. In order for its unfamiliarity to have been established in the first place, however, it must already be mapped—“gridded”—by faciality. The “explorative” mission of the white male protagonist is doomed to fail, because wherever the white man goes, the abstract machine of faciality has been first. Every symbol of unfamiliarity and difference within the hyper-technological landscape exists as such only because they have already been facialized. In a sense, then, there is no newness or originality in cyberspace, and it has failed its only vocation.

\textit{Self—Screen—Other}

Cyberspace, argues Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, is characterized by the dichotomous experience of disembodied white protagonists and embodied orientalized subjects (“Orienting Orientalism” 119). This embodiment—the projection of the (techno-)Orient onto a mind-space to be seen, felt, and touched—is integral to understanding cyberspace as a virtual reality.

This binary of disembodied mind on the one hand, and embodied and orientalized other on the other is not sustainable. This binary breaks down not because the orientalized other is suddenly afforded the status as subject, but rather because the boundary between self and other, self and self, breaks down whenever one jacks in. Or, to be more precise, this division between self and other is itself a response to connectivity, which means that connectivity precedes the “user”—which means that this boundary is a screen rather than a shield (Chun, “Orienting Orientalism” 119).

Both Deleuze and Guattari’s and Chun’s use of the word “screen” are key to understanding how cyborgs and cyberspace function within space and time as symbols of
unfamiliar intimacy. The screen gives meaning and hierarchy to difference; it is the receptor of subjectivity. Quite literally, a screen is seen through: it constitutes an experience of depth flattened into pixels and wire that is both obscuring and revealing. The screen is an entrypoint and an exitpoint (a screen door, or a computer monitor); it is transitory, impermanent, and easily fractured. I believe that the digital implications of the term “screen” allow for a technologically fluent conversation. (As Choi and Mao demonstrate, language, too, is a screen: sounds with the promise—or, illusion—of depth.) Though the elasticity and vagueness of the word “screen” makes for compelling imagery, I am using “screen” in this chapter to refer specifically to that which differentiates interior and exterior (or, self and other). In other words, I am presenting the “screen” as an alternative to the “boundary.” There are three characteristics of the screen that I identify as relevant to this discussion: first, the screen (as opposed to the boundary) is not naturalized. Whereas boundaries are often perceived as endemic to society, screens are explicitly constructed. Second, the screen is transparent: beyond the screen is the promise of another world, filtered into fantasy through pixels. Finally, screens are fragile and easily shattered. In the context of cyborgs and cyberspace (and, particularly, Choi and Mao’s poetry) I believe that reconceptualizing the boundary as a screen promotes a more relevant and complete analysis. The screen is native to cyberspace: it is an integral part of the landscape—the border between worlds and bodies.

Deleuze and Guattari’s choice of the word “landscape” is especially important. A landscape differs from mere topography or nature; a landscape does not merely exist, but is perceived. A landscape is created through sight and cognition; it is not simply an image, but an image with depth. Like the screen between cyberspace and material reality, there is always the implication of more—of an exalted dimension to be experienced, if only the white wall of the
signifier could be destroyed. The landscape reterritorializes the face; cyberspace reterritorializes the cyborg. (Consider, for example, Brande’s claim that cyberspace embodies the unending revolutionizing of the means of production: it is repetition without cycle, the recall of permissible disorder.)

In the same way that cyberspace becomes personified as a hostile yet inferior enemy to the white male protagonist of the science fiction narrative, the East Asian cyborg becomes objectified (landscapified) as scenery. This is not, however, a simple process of objectification where the subject is treated as subhuman to justify violence (though this is certainly part of it); it is a process of facialization. When the cyborg slides into its face, the screen between self and other (interior and exterior) also slides into place. It’s important, here, to keep in mind that this screen is not absolute and impermeable, but rather transparent. In Choi’s poetry, the screen becomes a method of protection: “When the human lunges for my hand, my face / is a perfect, solid screen” she writes in “It’s All Fun and Games until Someone Gains Consciousness” (58). The screen is endemic to the cyberspace landscape; by taking on characteristics of the landscape (or, sliding into landscapity), the face acts to conceal the speaker’s true feelings. Here, the screen is used to reinforce the self/other border in defense of the speaker. Even as it is perforated via human/cyborg touch (“the human lunges for my hand”), the screen acts to obscure the face. The screen becomes armor: “Chrome exterior. / Stainless” (Choi 58).

“The close up film treats the face primarily as a landscape,” argue Deleuze and Guattari, “That is the definition of film, black hole and white wall, screen and camera” (172). It is this process of facialization—of landscapification—which is pointed out by the title of Oculus; it is this process which I aim to elucidate with the use of the word “screen.” Beginning at some point between the eye and the camera, the cyborg can no longer be simply the “Other” or a reflection
of the white masculine self. Literary theorist Seo-Young Chu conceptualizes science fiction as a world of cognitive estrangement: a combination of completely knowable (cognitive) and completely unknowable (estranged) objects and symbols (Chu 3). The result of this dialectic of known and unknown, she claims, is that science fiction becomes a realm of cognitive estrangement, filled with objects of wonder. In other words, familiarity and unfamiliarity alone become insufficient terms of analysis; the cyborg is both and neither, an intimate unfamiliarity. Indeed, we begin to realize that the self/other binary was insufficient all along: not because of an abstract appeal to posthuman universality, but because the “self” (Cartesian, neoliberal, psychoanalytic, etc.) has always been an inadequate framework for conceptualizing relations of alterity.

Choi and Mao demonstrate how, as Chun claims, “connectivity precedes the ‘user’” by blending character and setting (or, face and landscape) in *Soft Science* and *Oculus* (“Orienting Orientalism” 119). “Even the walls are chewing,” writes Choi in “Acknowledgements” (9). Not only are the confines of the body expanded to include the exterior (the walls), but the exterior becomes the body—the self—even as it is made foreign. The mundane action of “chewing” becomes menacing and unrecognizable once attributed to an outside force. The cyborg’s intimate unfamiliarity is demonstrated through the language of exteriority: this is one of many instances in *Soft Science* where a standard function of the body becomes a strange spectacle through a deliberate blending of external and internal.

In “Teledildonics,” Mao conceptualizes a world opposite that of “Turing Test_Boundaries”—one in which the breach between interior and exterior and self and other becomes pleasurable and even liberatory (in the sense that it allows the cyborg distance from the body). If “Turing Test_Boundaries” depicts a hemorrhage of the self and body, then
“Teledildonics” describes a slow dissolution. At the same time, “Teledildonics” is characterized by a painful wistfulness; the cybernetic utopia described by the speaker is, as I will establish in a later reading of the poem, fantastical—accessible only through the imaginary. From the very title of the poem, it becomes clear that Mao is concerned with the intersection of technology and pornography. “Teledildonics” imagines a performance of sex and desire mediated through the screen:

faraway clavicles ribs
a pornography live through open
electrodes
touch your internet through your clothes

Here, technology is associated with a sense of openness—a sort of ecstatic vulnerability that denotes the dissolution of the screen between self/other and interior/exterior. Mao describes a “pornography live / through open / electrodes”: the “live” quality of the pornography (indicating a recording in real-time) creates a sense of urgency which is contrasted with the distance of the “faraway clavicles” (Mao 11). Simultaneously, situating the poem as a “pornography” implies a level of performance which reinforces the sense of remoteness. The form of the poem, too, utilizes white space to create an effect of separation between words. The screen, then—that which marks the entrance into the technological world—denotes a curious tension between intimacy and distance. It is both an interruption and a gateway.

Mao establishes a “self” which is at once individual and collective; an internet-body only flimsily protected by fabric. “[T]ouch your internet through your clothes,” she writes: clothes, in this scenario, operate as the “shield” between self/other that technology reveals to be merely a screen (Mao 11; Chun, “Orienting Orientalism” 119). Not only can virtual communication be
accessed through the body, but the internet takes the place of flesh and skin, finalizing the transformation into the cyborg Other. Even the screen of “clothes” is flexible: technology is the method through which the self/other and self/self screen is elasticized. The “internet” is not only a reality that can be possessed (“your internet,”) but it is also literalized into flesh. Mao’s invocation of free touch without borders and use of the language of possession recalls Brande’s argument about the neoliberal contradictions of cyberspace (i.e. the coexisting fantasies of consumption by the other and hyperindividualism). The screen, then, is the method through which high-tech fantasies of connection are realized; it is the porous and fragmented distinction between organic self and cybernetic other. At the same time, however, it functions as a dam which separates the bleak and finite reality from the unlimited and almost excessive ecstasy of cyberspace (think, for example, of the bulging and convex screen of early televisions, bloated with the effort of holding back the brilliant technicolor potential of technology). It becomes the billboard—or, the white wall—onto which simultaneous fantasies of overconsumption and hyperindividualism are etched. In other words, it is the method through which cyberspace becomes landscape.

Conclusion

Franny Choi finishes “Shokushu Goukan for the Cyborg Soul” with a plea:

I am only a cuttlefish lying open-jawed under the sand,
a squid flashing red as it pulls a fishgirl into its beak. I am

just trying to sleep. To feed. To fill
myself and grow larger from it.

Or: I am only trying to slither back into my first skin.
Or: I am only trying to remember how it felt not to leak (28).
Ultimately, the posthuman paradise of cyberspace is only liberatory for those watching from the other side of the screen. For the landscapified cyborg speaker, who is literally leaking into the surroundings, the shattering of the self/other and interior/exterior screen represents an inescapable hemorrhage rather than an exalted liberation from the self. In cyberspace, the ecstasy of disembodied transcendence is reserved only for the white male tourist; even when a cyborg is pulled from its body, it tries to “slither back,” perpetually embodied. “Okay,” writes Choi, “so I am both the woman holding the camera and the woman / being opened by it—nothing special about that” (28).

Chapter Two: Lost Futures & the Cybernetic Utopia

Introduction

Cyberspace, as a reflection of the particular fears and fantasies of late capitalist hegemonies, is uniquely speculative. This is not to say, however, that the virtuality of cyberspace impedes its influence; in fact, as we will establish later in the chapter, the agency of the virtual is especially pervasive in contemporary media. Indeed, cyberspace, in addition to privileging certain aesthetic values such as hyperconsumption, presents uniquely compressed and collaged temporalities which bleed into reality. “The issues now that we’re living through are to do with cyberspace time,” Mark Fisher argues, “and with the temporalities that are imposed by cyberspace” (Fisher, 7:14). The shift to broadband, Fisher claims, has engendered a “panic temporality” in which everything happens at once—that is, the digital communication made possible by the internet dramatically accelerated the experience of time to create an effect of
simultaneity. Cyberspace and media representations of cyberspace, then, are deeply associated with specific temporalities marked by haste and simultaneity.

*Soft Science* and *Oculus* combine two literary genres which are distinctly concerned with the passage and effects of time: poetry and science fiction. Poetry in particular is deeply indebted to temporal markers—stanza, white space, syntax—which manipulate the pacing of lyric in order to produce various effects (compression, lethargy, cyclicality etc.). Science fiction, on the other hand, typically foregrounds speculative imaginings of the future which often create a sense of rapidity and unceasing progression in line with Fisher’s “panic temporality.” *Soft Science* and *Oculus* reflect the urgency of cyberspace and its associated genres, featuring the indomitable “sense of a future that crowds the present” which Brande identifies as central to cyberspace (Brande 513). It is this very future—both inevitable and unreachable—which contaminates the pages of Choi and Mao’s poetry through returning phrases and forms.

In the following chapter, I shift my focus from cyberspace and faciality to the interplay of time and fantasy. Specifically, I build on the works of Fredric Jameson, Jacques Derrida, and Mark Fisher to argue that the poetic cyborg of *Soft Science* and *Oculus* is haunted by the lost future of the cybernetic utopia. I have intentionally chosen two center Marxist theorists (Jameson and Fisher) in my discussion about time. As discussed in the previous chapter, David Brande argues that the cyborg can be understood as a product of late capitalism. The cyborg, he claims, is “an ideological fantasy of crucial importance to advanced capitalist society:” it represents technology’s promise to reinvigorate capitalism by moving and removing the physical limits of production (Brande 511). Compounding Brande’s claim with Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s analysis of race as integral to constructing cyberspace as a consumer paradise, I believe, can facilitate a greater understanding of the cyborg as a cultural artifact. Like Saïd’s Orient, the cyborg functions
as fantasy. If, as Brande and Chun argue, the cyborg is a key to capitalist and imperialist imaginations of a future, then a Marxist critique of technological temporalities is vital to building an accurate understanding of the cyborg’s relationship to time.

Temporal uncertainty is key to narratives of techno-Orientalism. “While Orientalism defines a modern West by producing an oppositional and premodern East,” argue Roh et al., “techno-Orientalism symmetrically and yet contradictorily completes this project by creating a collusive, futurized Asia to further affirm the West’s centrality” (7). It is the presence of the East Asian cyborg and the virtual landscape of cyberspace which configures the techno-Orient as a defining oppositional force to the imperial core (what Roh et al. term “the West.”) In other words, it is the space of cyberspace—the projection of a foreign and conquerable landscape onto the digital world—which informs its disjointed timeline in which East Asia is perceived as both threatening a hyper-technological future and mired in a traditional past. The fantasy of East Asia portrayed by techno-Orientalism, then, is relegated to either the future or past and never permitted to fully exist in the present.

In techno-Orientalist science fiction, the realm of the present is reserved for the white American audience: it is the home and body that the white male protagonist (and, by extension, the white male reader) returns to after the exhilarating disembodiment of (to use Gibson’s words) “jacking in” to cyberspace. Orientalism and techno-Orientalism go hand in hand; Euro-American fears of a hyper-technological East Asia are directly informed by similar fears of a “historical” East Asia which is backwards, traditional, and barbaric. In both Orientalist and techno-Orientalist literature and media, then, the fantasy projection of East Asia that is the (techno-)Orient is temporally displaced, confined to the non-present. To borrow Donna Haraway’s phrasing from the epigraph of *Soft Science*, the East Asian cyborg inhabits a
“historically constituted body” which is made up of futuristic parts (7). Ultimately, *Soft Science* and *Oculus* argue that technology and desire are intimately entangled through a shared racialized and gendered past.

In the following chapter, I contextualize Choi and Mao’s poetic cyborg within Derrida and Fisher’s theories of hauntology. I am particularly interested in using hauntology as a lens to untangle the poetic cyborg’s relationship to the past and future. As Derrida argues, “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology” (202). Hauntology, then, is not an isolated lens of analysis, but rather a *methodology* which can be used to understand the gray area between present and non-present, being and non-being. Notably, “hauntology” is a pun on “ontology”; in line with ontological inquiry, hauntology is preoccupied with the being or non-being of the specter. While Derrida uses haunting specifically to explore what many claimed to be the end of communism after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, I am more interested in its applications to the passage and experience of time.

The specter, though often conceived as a being of the past, has no stable temporal point of origin: it is defined by both its influence on and absence from the present. Derrida observes that the specter “is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some “thing” that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other.”\(^5\) Drawing from Derrida’s frequent use of *Hamlet* (especially the quote “time is out of joint”), I am particularly interested in exploring how

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\(^5\) Arguably, the cyborg falls under this category of soul-that-is-not-a-soul and body-that-is-not-a-body—that “thing” which cannot be defined within Cartesian dualism and other traditional European measurements of the subject, but I am more concerned with what haunts the cyborg than what it haunts. Additionally, the cyborg differs from Derrida’s conception of the specter in that it is disturbingly visual. In contrast, the specter is almost never seen: it, claims Derrida, “looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there” (6). The specter’s influence is partially derived from its invisibility. The cyborg, conversely, is a creature of spectacle.
haunting can be framed as a disruption of chronology, or as a glitch in the proper order and function of time. Though the phrase hauntology is only used a total of three times in Specters of Marx, the subject has taken on new meanings in Mark Fisher’s works. In Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures, Fisher introduces what he terms a “lost future”: those highly anticipated but ultimately unrealized futures promised in the post-World War era which “[haunt] the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty-first century” (Ghosts of My Life 15). In fact, he argues, “The future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production” (Fisher, “What Is Hauntology” 16). Fisher’s conception of a lost future, I suggest, is especially poignant when applied to the influence of the cybernetic utopia in Soft Science and Oculus.

If we must “introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept,” the cyborg is a rich subject of study. There are two questions which naturally arise when applying discourses of the specter to Soft Science and Oculus: the cyborg as haunting versus the cyborg as haunted. I am primarily concerned with the second, as I believe it is key to illuminating the cyborg’s complicated relationship with the future. Combining Fisher’s idea of hauntological lost futures with an understanding of temporal difference as a method of racialization, I argue that the cyborgs of Soft Science and Oculus are haunted by the lost future of the cybernetic utopia—a paradise which, ultimately, relies on techno-Orientalist visions of automated and feminized Asian labor to fuel its relentless appetite for progress. Conceptualizing the cyborg as a haunted being in its own right and not simply as a ghostly manifestation of modernity’s extremes, I believe, leads us towards the development of a more holistic understanding of the cyborg.

In Choi and Mao’s poetry, the cyborg cannot escape dreams of a cybernetic utopia, but neither can it reach them. Hauntology, I argue, provides the best framework with which to
understand this relationship. If techno-Orientalism can be understood as, in part, an adaptation of
the Orientalist project to a rapidly globalizing world, then the cybernetic utopia is just as much a
product of the past as one of the future, inextricably linked to historical conceptions of East Asia.
Like Derrida’s specter of the past, the cybernetic utopia has no pure point of temporal origin, and
the cyborg, key to imaginings of the cybernetic utopia, experiences a similar temporal
displacement. In Soft Science and Oculus, the vestiges of the specter can be found in linguistic
traces—repeated phrases and patterns—which construct a temporal experience of simultaneity
not unlike Fisher’s “cyberspace time.” “Repetition and first time,” writes Derrida of the specter
and the spectral event: a haunting is an anticipated cyclicality, which functions simultaneously as
a singularity—both as a first, and by nature of firsts, a last (10). Hauntology, he continues, is “A
question of repetition: a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings
because it begins by coming back” (11). Similarly, the cybernetic utopia—the cyborg’s lost
future—is a future of the past: all renderings of a techno-utopia mark a return to the
sociohistorical moment of its conception, stuck in an incessant loop of beginning and coming
back. With no uncontaminated point of origin, the cybernetic utopia occurs everywhere and
nowhere at once—its action and influence depends on its absence.⁶

Racial Difference & Embodied Time

The subject of disjointed time has been dissected to the point of repetition, an unsubtle
sort of irony, and the argument that technology (coupled with various maladies of the current era,
such as postmodernity) alters the experience and function of time is not a new one. Railroads,
telephones, and computers, for example, have all stretched and redefined hours around the work

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⁶ A brief return to Deleuze and Guattari: for the specter, there is no Christ-face, no Year Zero, no white wall with a
black hole. Instead, it occupies a curious cyclicality: faceless, senseless, searching.
day. The relationship between technology and time, however, is not so simple as modifier and modified. As Warren Liu argues compellingly, considering that “temporality itself (and not simply the “objects” that measure it) might be understood as a technology” opens up opportunities for deeper understandings of the relationship between race, desire, and technology (“Queer Excavations: Technology Temporality, Race” 66). Time is one of several technologies integral to the fantasy of techno-Orientalism—it is a fraught ideological territory over which the imperial core is determined to reaffirm its monopoly. At its core, techno-Orientalism is a struggle for control over the future.

In discourses of the cyborg, it is important to note that certain temporalities are often used to denote racial difference. *Soft Science* and *Oculus* do not solely respond to futuristic narratives of techno-Orientalism; both are equally interested in the historical underpinnings of Orientalism. If we understand Orientalism as an extension of the Euro-American imperial enterprise which weaponizes notions of traditionality and backwardness as justifications for violence, then relegation to the past denotes a form of temporal displacement which undergirds the logic of white supremacy. Similarly, if techno-Orientalism, as Roh et al. claim, “completes” the Orientalist project, then confinement to a hyper technological future functions equally as a method of distance and dehumanization. The Orient and techno-Orient, then, combine to consign the fantastical East Asia of the American imagination to a peripheral temporality against which the present temporal landscape (always coded as white and masculine) is defined. “[I]f temporality is understood as a form of technology,” continues Liu, then “specific techno-Orientalist tropes… might then more generally be understood themselves as premised on a naturalization of a technologically mediated ordering that equates *temporal* with *racial* difference” (“Queer Excavations” 66). In short, American representations of East Asia are often
presented as either mired in a traditional past or threatening a hypertechnological future as a method of denoting racial difference.

Since (techno-)Orientalism is, in part, a temporal displacement to the past and future, I believe it is vital to touch on implications of embodiment and disembodiment. Certain materialist feminisms, claims Jameson, explore the idea that “the reduction to the present can thus also be formulated in terms of a reduction to the body as a present of time” (712). In other words, isolation to the present moment can be understood as isolation to the physical body. The past and future, conversely, are often rhetorically and narratively associated with disembodiment (e.g. reality as experienced not through the body as a site of processing knowledge but instead mediated through dream, prophecy, memory, screen, etc.). Such a stance, I believe, is especially interesting in the context of technologically-mediated desire, in which the white male viewer’s distance from the physical is often key to the pleasure promised by the cybernetic. Hypertechnological futures portend to facilitate (in the tradition of the Cartesian dualism) the transcendence of the mind from the physical; a sort of mastering or conquering of the body and its finitude.\(^7\) Though I am cautious of leaning too heavily on discourses of the body, understanding how the constructed binary between the disembodied past/future and embodied present furthers the techno-Orientalist project can elucidate the relationship between the poetic cyborg and time. The implicit temporal and increasingly fragile stratification of racial difference central to Orientalism and techno-Orientalism, then, is organized as follows: the white masculine embodied present versus the East Asian feminine disembodied past and future.

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\(^7\) At the same time, however, this distance from the (white, male) self is made possible by a reimagining of familiar tropes of the fetishized and Orientalized “Other” for the white male viewer to define and measure themselves against. The distance from the body promised by cyberspace, then, is illusory; cyberspace is a place of sexual concourse with and violence against mechanized East Asian subjects.
This stratification, however, is exceedingly paradoxical; even if the hypertechnological future represents an opportunity for the white male protagonist to escape the confines of physicality, the East Asian subjects encountered in the future are often painfully tied to their bodies and the violence enacted upon them. Whether embodiment and disembodiment constitute a pleasurable or desirable experience, then, depends entirely on the body in question is white and male. This certainly aligns with Chun’s argument that the very insistence of the “binary of disembodied mind on the one hand, and embodied and Orientalized other on the other” reveals the precarity of its fabrication. That is to say, a techno-Orientalist cyberspace promises pleasure through transcending the physical—a promise which is realized and defined against a horde of highly objectified East Asian cyborgs. The “Orientalized other,” claims Chun, is not afforded distance from the physical; its body—which is, to the white American observer, one of both extreme pleasure and extreme horror—is central to its role as an object of desire. However, Chun suggests, the disembodiment promised by cyberspace relies on a level of connectivity between minds which, on the surface at least, destabilizes stratifications between self and other—and, in the process, fragments the very distinctions of white self and Oriental other which ground the techno-Orientalist understandings of cyberspace in the first place (“Orienting Orientalism” 119). Thus, techno-Orientalist applications of embodiment and disembodiment fluctuate in order to maintain the centrality of white desire.

The tensions between human and machine (or, humanized and mechanized) frequently manifest as uncertainty over the precise location of the border between the two. Often, this distinction is determined by whether or not the body is a prosthesis which serves to further agency (in the case of the white male liberal subject) or limit it (in the case of the East Asian cyborg). Both *Soft Science* and *Oculus* use language of injury as an assertion of the cyborg’s
fraught inseparability from its body, inverting the traditional techno-Orientalist narrative in which the East Asian cyborg is the passive recipient of the white male protagonist’s desire. At the same time, however, Choi and Mao’s poetic cyborg struggles to stay grounded in its body. “have you ever been drugged / i mean / not on purpose,” asks Choi’s cyborg speaker in “Turing Test_Problem Solving” (53).

// if you don’t like it here why don’t you go somewhere else
i mean have you stood / laughing / then watched the laugh / unlatch / move / past your skin / ever felt yourself peel / from yourself / like wallpaper / watched your limbs flop / mechanical crane / saying yes & yes / & bucking / & ligament / i guess have you ever been / too drunk / to be afraid

// please respond to the previous question

maybe an injury even / maybe even just a leg / asleep / have you ever tried to shake / your body / into obedience / tried to shake yourself / back into it

// what you are describing are fairly common experiences among humans

// now if we could return to the experiment

The tension between embodiment and disembodiment reflects the tension of the very real harm described by the cyborg speaker and its distance from the experience.

The borders between the past and the future, *Soft Science* and *Oculus* reveal, are porous. In “Anna May Wong Rates the Runway,” the speaker describes a future which cannot let go of the past: eager to escape a past in which she plays only doomed seductresses, twentieth century Chinese actress Anna May Wong arrives in the future only to discover an eerie repetition of her own 1920s experience.

Even the white models
all wear their hair in straight bangs.
The Asian models, too—like clones
they glide out, lush throats
throttled by nephrite. The editors
call the pieces “1920s chinoiserie.” (Mao 74)

Here, Mao references the 2014 New York Fashion Week, in which designer Anna Sui designed an entire seasonal collection (indeed referred to as “1920s chinoiserie”) inspired by Wong’s own fashion (Blanks, “Anna Sui Fall 2014 Ready-to-Wear”). 8 Significantly, chinoiserie is typically associated with fantastical and frequently unrealistic European ‘reproductions’ of Chinese fashion and design. The 2014 runway show, then, is a misrepresentation of a misrepresentation; a spectacle of a spectacle, mediated through so many temporalities that its inaccuracy becomes one of the central truths of the poem. Wong, the speaker of the poem, comments on the irony of a future in which the fashion world cherry picks the glamor of Wong’s stardom and leaves the unsavory bits untold:

These women
slip into the diabolical roles
I’ve played but don’t pay for it.

Now I am someone’s muse.
Good.

If temporal difference can also be understood as racial difference, then Wong’s confinement in the poem to an eerily repetitive past and future is illustrative of the collusion between Orientalism and techno-Orientalism. Wong’s experience in the future is an extreme form of disembodiment: severed from her own timeline, she watches as dozens of models wearing her clothing and hairstyle are applauded where she herself was derided. Quite literally, her body is

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8 The show can be found on Vogue’s website at the following link, and brings up the complications of an Asian designer dressing white models in clothing inspired by traditional Asian designs (many of the ready-to-wear pieces worn by white models are explicitly inspired by the qipao, a traditional Chinese dress popular during Wong’s fame in the 1920s). Where, asks Mao’s poem, is the line between commodification and heritage? Between representation and spectacle?
no longer hers; though in the future Wong achieves the fame and centrality to inspire an entire runway show, she is still not in control of her image. Representation slips easily into spectacle; while Wong seems on the surface to be somewhat proud of her influence (“Now I am someone’s muse. / Good.”), she also recognizes that this renown comes with the consequence of the loss of authority over her own narrative. There is a kind of bitterness to Wong’s commentary, restrained in short lines and stanzas: “these women / slip into the diabolical roles / I’ve played but don’t pay for it,” she observes. Even in the future, the only roles available to Wong are “diabolical,” her style reduced to Chinoiserie, and even as muse—as the star of the show—Wong cannot escape misrepresentation.

Lost Futures

In the following sections, I hope to combine Derrida and Fishers’ hauntology with an understanding of temporal difference as a method of racialization to more completely understand the function of time in Soft Science and Oculus. If cyborgs are an integral future-building technology to the project of techno-Orientalism, what does it mean for the cyborg to long for its own utopic future? Many speculative fiction narratives respond, in part, to fears of technologically-driven alterations in the experience and function of time; cyberspace, claims Fisher, “changes our experience of time” (“Mark Fisher : Cybertime Crisis” 8:23). Much like Brande’s “sense of a future that crowds the present,” Fisher’s “panic temporality” frequently appears in speculative imaginings of cyberspace (Brande 513). Despite this, I believe it is insufficient to claim that the prevalence of cyborgs in American popular culture is simply a reaction to anxieties about the accelerated future. As much as cyborgs engender fears of a technologically dystopian world, they also respond to the promise and potential of
technology—i.e., the increasingly distant perfectly automated future. But if temporal difference can also be understood as racial difference, then the promise of a technological utopia is deeply entangled in projects of empire and capitalism.

Additionally, American conceptions of automated labor have been historically racialized as East Asian; American narratives of techno-Orientalism, claim Roh et. al., rely on perceptions of “the Asian body as a form of expendable technology” (11). The idea of a “cybernetic utopia” in American popular culture, then, is often an extension of techno-Orientalist imaginings which center the East Asian cyborg as a desired subject providing free labor. In a hypertechnological future, a utopia for some is always a dystopia for others. In “Anna May Wong Goes Home with Bruce Lee,” the speaker laments that the future—and the utopic happy endings it promises—is “not ours to keep” (35). Though utopia is not a vision created to accommodate the East Asian cyborg, Choi and Mao’s cyborg speaker yearns for a future in which technology and desire are forces of liberation, not oppression. The cybernetic utopia as it is typically conceived of within the framework of techno-Orientalism relies on the subjugation of the East Asian cyborg to fund and maintain limitless luxury and consumption for the white male protagonist. Like many other “paradises”, the cybernetic utopia is not only insufficiently inclusive, but its function depends on the racialized and automatized labor of those in alterity (in this case, the desirability and hypersexuality of the East Asian cyborg). The technological utopia produced by techno-Orientalism, then, is not only inaccessible to the East Asian cyborg but is *actively harmful* to it. Despite this, the cyborg longs for a future in which technology is liberatory; ultimately, I argue, Choi and Mao’s poetic cyborg is haunted by the lost future of the cybernetic utopia.
To help contextualize the cyborg within discourses of haunting, I return, once again, to Donna Haraway. “Pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted,” she claims; “there was always the specter of the ghost in the machine… They could not achieve man’s dream, only mock it” (69). As questions of machine autonomy become increasingly relevant, however, the machine gains a life of its own. It is no longer simply a reflection of the desires of its human creators or a tool in the unceasing narrative of progress; instead (at least, according to technological determinism) the machine itself has taken on the mantle of animator. That same narrative of progress which has been such a vital tool to empire and capital is no longer so easily controlled. Techno-Orientalism, as we established earlier, is one notable response to this: it is a belated attempt to re-restrict both the East Asian woman and the machine to vessels to be filled by the white man’s desires and fantasies.

Regardless, the cybernetic machine is radically different from its pre-cybernetic predecessor; now, argues Haraway, “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (69). Haraway’s use of the possessive pronoun “our” invokes Heidegger’s assertion of man’s desperation to master the machine. The machine is no longer simply a “mockery” of man’s dream—no longer simply specter—but instead a semi-autonomous object which engenders Euro-American fears “of being colonized, mechanized, and instrumentalized in [its] own pursuit of technological dominance” (Roh et. al. 4). The techno-Orient, Roh et. al. argue, is simply the “screen” onto which these fears are projected (the screen, too, is a specter: notable because of its non-presence). The poetic cyborg, then, is not a ghost; indeed, in *Soft Science* and *Oculus*, it becomes a haunted subject in its own right. What haunts is not the cyborg itself, but rather the unreached promise of technology—the limits and the potentialities of the ecstatic but ultimately unreachable utopic future.
If the cyborg is haunted by the lost futures of a cybernetic utopia, the specter is irrevocably tied to cyberspace. Haunting, claims Fisher, “happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time” (“Hauntology” 19). The specter of the cybernetic utopia is key to cyberspace’s temporalities; ultimately, cyberspace is “stained” with the cyborg’s lost future. The projection of the techno-Orient (that which is both historical and futuristic but never present) within cyberspace creates a virtuality ripe for haunting; juxtaposed and broken temporalities denote both racial difference and ghostly influence. As we established at the beginning of this chapter, *Soft Science* and *Oculus* are greatly affected by the sense of simultaneity engendered by cyberspace. The relationships between the past, present, and future are convoluted so dramatically that, in “Yumi Miru Kikai [The Dreaming Machine],” Mao talks of “predicting” the past and “remembering” the future (89). In *Soft Science* and *Oculus*, time no longer functions chronologically; instead, cyborg moves through time anachronously, like a spider at the center of a great web.

Utopia is powerful in its impotence, a specter with exclusively virtual agency. It is precisely its distance—its impossibility—which grants the utopia such jurisdiction over the cyborg. As Mark Fisher argues, “Hauntology itself can be thought of as fundamentally about forces which act at a distance—that which… insists (has causal effects) without (physically) existing” (“What Is Hauntology” 20). Sally Wen Mao’s poem “Teledildonics” describes a conceptual utopia which the cyborg speaker cannot help but long for—a world in which technology and desire are liberating. The fantastical nature of this cybernetic utopia is drawn into sharp relief beside a reality which has been destroyed, descriptions like “lifeless reefs” invoking a landscape sucked dry by exploitation (Mao 11). This extreme contrast foregrounds the futility of utopia: even as the speaker imagines a place in which “nothing will hurt,” they stand beside
“palm trees” which “chafe the skin” (Mao 11). A paradise, this reminds us, is never universal. The very act of imagining a truly liberating posthuman paradise emphasizes its impossibility, embodying philosopher Pierre Levy’s claim that “the virtual is that which has potential rather than actual existence” (Levy 23). Ultimately, “Teledildonics” is not a poem about utopia, but about its absence—that “desire for something more” which Wendy Hui Kyong Chun places between the fantasy of cyberspace and the reality of the internet (“Race and Software” 307). It is not so much utopia itself that is slipping out of reach, but the very possibility of imagining it; as Fredric Jameson argues, “The waning of the utopian idea is a fundamental historical and political symptom” of postmodernity and late capitalism (“The Politics of Utopia”).

Key to the bittersweetness of the cybernetic utopia is its futurity. The beginning of the poem, which describes material reality, is written in short bursts in the present simple tense which mimic the blunt and immediate nature of the landscape described (“touches flare little moths / or schisms”) (Mao 11). When discussing the virtual world, on the other hand, Mao uses meandering phrases set in the future simple tense (“and nothing will hurt”) (Mao 12). This has the effect of making the speaker’s virtual fantasy seem distant and dreamlike, even when it is the central landscape of the poem—it is a lost future which, as Fisher claims, is a force which acts at a distance. The remote quality engendered by the use of the future simple tense mirrors the “virtuality” which Fisher identifies as characteristic of a specter. The VR utopia exists only as potentiality: even in the speaker’s mind, it is unreachable and chimeric, relegated to a future which may never be experienced.

Even as the cybernetic utopia reveals an ecstasy where “all touch gives pleasure,” its grandeur is undercut by an increasing uneasiness; the “paradisiacal goggles” that the speaker uses to access the utopia are “never-fallow” and “never-breaking” (Mao 11). Its endlessness is
exactly what gives it the sense of disquiet, highlighting what Fisher refers to as, “The tensions between the infinity of cyberspace and the finitude of the organism” (“Mark Fisher : Cybertime Crises” 40:49). Allusions to a voyeur in “Teledildonics” (e.g. “a pornography live”) reveal that even in the dream of a cybernetic utopia, the cyborg cannot escape spectacle (Mao 11).

Reduced to an eroticized stereotype, the speakers of Soft Science and Oculus struggle to disentangle sex and pleasure from fetishization and violence. In “Teledildonics,” however, Mao imagines a virtual reality (VR) utopia in which “all touch is welcome” (12). Technology, in this instance, facilitates protection and community through desire. The poem is characterized by a deep wistfulness: the world of welcome touch stands in sharp relief beside a material reality which has been so destroyed by modern technology that the speaker is tempted to “spend the rest / of my life / with my remote control” (Mao 11). By describing the “internet” as a body that can be touched and felt, Mao plays with associations of sexual pleasure and violence: the clarification of “welcome” touch is necessary only because the cyborg’s internet-body is often touched/jacked into without permission (Mao 12).

Central to the fantasy of escape is (the illusion of) control: the speaker decides when and on what terms they are touched. For this short poem, the dissolution of borders becomes an instrument of liberation, as Donna Haraway claimed it could be. The cyborg is finally offered a happy ending in which “nothing will hurt / and nothing will bruise” (Mao 12). Mao’s speaker can author its own fantasy instead of being an object of someone else’s. The painless paradise that “Teledildonics” imagines can be poignantly analyzed through the lens of Fisher’s lost future: the cybernetic utopia becomes a “virtuality which… impinges on the present,” notable in its non-presence (Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?” 17). But in Fisher’s conception, “What haunts is the specter of a world in which all the marvels of communicative technology could be combined
with a sense of solidarity” (50.) That is, the potentialities offered by the lost futures he describes are inherently liberatory and pure. In contrast, the paradise of “Teledildonics” is one where utopia and pleasure are achieved through distance: it is the “remote control” which allows the speaker to distance themselves from both their body and the destroyed reality.

“Teledildonics” provides a vital perspective because it offers a glimpse into a utopic cyberspace/virtual reality which is not dominated by white cis-heterosexual desire. It rehabilitates the connective promise of technology posed by early posthumanism, but acknowledges the gap between fantasy and reality. On the one hand, there is “a pornography live / through open / electrodes … next to the lifeless reefs” (i.e. the fractured reality and tainted desire), and on the other the virtual “sea that will never drown us / in the wellness shore” (i.e. virtual utopia and pure pleasure) (Mao 11, 12). The gap between potential and reality is mediated by the screen, which becomes at once restrictive and porous, and the imagined utopia takes on key characteristics of a specter. The speaker longs for a utopic future in which the forces of technology and desire are solely liberatory, but even purely speculative visions of a cybernetic utopia are inextricable from racialized temporalities. The paradisiacal future, then, is resigned to haunting—to a potential, distance force; a virtual reality.

*Fatal Patterns*

Fisher identifies two types of hauntology which may be useful in conceptualizing the poetic cyborg. First, there is “that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic “compulsion to repeat,” a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern)” (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 19). In other words, history. Second, there is the future: “that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an
anticipation shaping current behavior) (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 19). A lost future, I would argue, falls partially into both categories: it is something which “has not yet happened” and something which “is no longer.” The lost future is quite literally stuck in the fraught space between present and non-present, both in the sense of existence and of time. The lost future, perhaps even more so than the specters of the past, is bereft of any point of temporal origin; it is defined solely by its relation to the past and present.

Choi’s poem “A Brief History of Cyborgs” features both conceptions of haunting. The poem tells the story of both Alan Turing, renowned scientist, and the development of the cyborg; desire, reveals “A Brief History of Cyborgs,” is in itself a type of historical technology which is intimately involved in the construction of imagined (and lost) futures. “Once, a scientist in Britain asked, *can machines think*?” Choi writes. In many ways, the complicated history of technology reflects current representations of the East Asian cyborg: Turing’s expression of desire and the East Asian cyborgs’ are both shaped by forces of hegemony. Turing was forcibly denied the physical experience of desire via chemical castration. Conversely, the East Asian cyborg in American popular culture is violently hypersexualized: forced to perform desireability for the pleasure of the cisheterosexual white male protagonist (and by extension, for the white viewer).

The history of machine thought is incomplete without Turing, and his story is undeniably embedded in discourses of the cyborg. “ Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present,” notes Edward Saïd, “What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues albeit in different forms, perhaps” (*Culture and Imperialism* 3). By including Turing in “A Brief History
of Cyborgs,” Choi demonstrates the entanglement between the history of technology, the history of desire, and futuristic imaginings of a hypersexual Asian-coded cyborg. Turing’s story becomes a specter to the machines he helped conceptualize; the violent historical proscription of Turing’s desire reflects inversely in the hypersexualization of the cyborg, embodying Fisher’s “traumatic compulsion to repeat” and “fatal pattern” (Ghosts of My Life 19).

Franny Choi begins “A Brief History of Cyborgs” with two stanzas: “Once, an animal with hands like mine learned to break a seed with two / stones—one hard and one soft. / Once, a scientist in Britain asked: Can machines think? He built a machine, taught it to read ghosts, and a new kind of ghost was born” (15). Linked by the anaphoric repetition of “once,” the stanzas repeat and bisect the title of the collection (Soft Science). “Soft” appears at the end of the first stanza, while “scientist” begins the second, creating a form of pseudo-enjambment (despite the completed sentences) in which the title is stretched between the two lines. The spatial separation emphasizes the oxymoronic contrast of the phrase “soft science,” constructing a binary of the human/animal and machine that will continue to be referenced throughout the poem. Notably, “soft” and “science” are broken by the repetition of the word “once,” which orients the reader in time (“once,” as in “in the past” or “not now”) (15). In contrast, the use of “once” also introduces a level of confusion, fluidity, and even mythicality to the poem’s timeline, emphasizing the intrusion of broken time. “Once” denotes a haunting: “that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality” (Fisher, Ghosts of My Life 19). Often used in verbal retellings of events, the word indicates inexactness; that the specifics of temporality are jumbled or irrelevant, and it is enough to know that the event happened in the past. Soft—once—science: history (‘onceness’) either bridges softness and science (organic and machine) or cuts between
them. Ultimately, “A Brief History of Cyborgs” is a violent collision between history and future; between the haunting of the no longer and the haunting of the not yet.

By repetition of the collection’s title and synonymous phrases (softness/flesh and science/technology/hardness), “A Brief History of Cyborgs” becomes a way to better comprehend how desire and technology function within the entire collection. The poem, I argue, presents the histories of desire and technology as one and the same; invocations of “softness” are intimately connected with desire (both violent and consensual), while “science” represents the hardness of technology. Additionally, both “soft” and “hard” invoke the physical sense of touch, further contextualizing the poem within discourses of sex and desire.

Additionally, the comparison of “soft” and “hard” contextualized within the history of technology plays with associations of software and hardware. Software refers to the internal programming and data of a machine, while hardware references the physical parts of the machine that are integral for its function (e.g. keyboards, screens, and trackpads). The difference between soft(ware) and hard(ware), then, is one of tangibility. Soft(ware) is the immaterial interior, while hard(ware) is the concrete exterior, which is especially relevant in a poem which centers the technological body and its boundaries. Here, once again, the screen between interior and exterior, character and setting slides into place: “even blood, when it comes down to it, is only a series of rules,” writes Choi (15). Perhaps, then, it is only language itself (with its own series of rules) which draws the distinction between software and hardware. Towards the end of the poem, the interior (or, the software) of the cyborg speaker’s body is both forcibly and voluntarily revealed: she is broken “open like a seed,” and in response, she says, “Come in. Make yourselves at home” (Choi 15). It is the very transparency of the interior/exterior (or, software/hardware) screen which makes it both alluring and dangerous; the depth behind the screen, the cyborg’s open and
“glittering jaw,” is a fantasy in which the viewer (or, in this case, reader) is easily lost. The repetition of imagery from the first stanzas (seed, opening, soft and hard) reinforces the poem’s cyclicality. As the narrative of the poem progresses, repeating language makes new events feel more and more familiar (recall, once again, Derrida’s claim of “repetition and first time”). History, then, is central to the process of fusing organism and machine.

Furthermore, soft(ware) and hard(ware) are integral to the poem’s invocation of a narrative of progress and development; the stones, “one hard and one soft,” are the key to breaking open the seed in the first stanza, catalyzing the transformation from “animal” to “scientist” (Choi 14). Though the suffix “ware” is absent from the poem, its exclusion is so noticeable that, almost specter-like, it becomes a part of the poem’s coded language. The words software and hardware are, like the seed, broken open, or left unfinished; this cleaving isolates the two halves of the words and highlights each in turn.

“A scientist made a machine girl and wedded her to the internet. He walked her down the aisle and said, Teach her well. The trolls rubbed their soft hands on their soft thighs,” writes Choi (14). Here, softness represents a kind of voyeuristic promise: a choiceless desire tinged with sickening anticipation. Softness represents both the vulnerability of the flesh (“soft thighs”) and the violence committed by it (“rubbing,” “filling”) (14). “The British scientist was discovered to be a soft man,” Choi continues, “he made a machine that could break any code, as a means of hardening a little” (14). In this case, the “softness” discovered in the scientist most likely refers to the fact that Alan Turing was gay. The softness of his desire is contrasted with imagery of the machine, which facilitates “hardening.” If temporal difference often implies racial difference, then it can also function more broadly as a method of denoting aberrance or deviancy. Just as the East Asian cyborg in Soft Science is relegated through the future by prescribed desire (i.e., forced
hypersexuality and passivity), Turing is confined to the past. By juxtaposing Turing’s historical position and the technological future, “A Brief History of Cyborgs” produces a broken cybernetic temporality over which the technology’s liberatory potential—its lost future—looms large.

While the repetition of “soft” and “hard” throughout “A Brief History of Cyborgs” certainly emphasizes the difference between “soft” desire and “hard” technology, I believe it also positions the two as inseparable and co-constituted. The history of technology—of the cyborg—is also the history of desire, of contradiction. In a manner of speaking, the cyborg is the synthesis between the two ideas: a Soft Science, a technology made flesh through the force of desire, a living machine haunted by its creator’s lost future.

“At Disneyland, I watched a robot dance the Macarena. Everyone clapped, and the clapping, too, was a technology,” writes Choi (14). Notably, Disneyland is both a place of the future (of the “not yet”; of suspended disbelief and oversaturated technological achievements) and of the past (of the “no longer”; of childhood, or a time before the screen lost its magic). As Choi points out, even body movements which are quintessentially human (e.g. clapping) are technologies; communication can never be fully extricated from performance. As Soft Science progresses, the reader becomes painfully aware that poems, too, are a performance, and the visual act of reading feels increasingly voyeuristic. There is a sense of inevitability within the temporal progression of the poem, achieved by repeated phrases, rhythms, and punctuation patterns. Each event feels prescribed; the haunting takes place in a repetition of, to use Fisher’s words, “fatal patterns.” By cycling through the same motifs and stanza formats, Choi produces a dragging sort of familiarity; each stanza evokes a sense of déjà vu. Both in form and content,
then, the poem produces effects of haunting: the histories of technology and desire irrevocably shape the cyborg’s imagined futures.

Conclusion

I began writing this chapter shortly after I listened to the first episode of Franny Choi and Danez Smith’s podcast Vs.. Recorded during the political turmoil following the 2016 election, Choi, Smith, and their featured guest Eve Ewing discuss what it means to build community in a world which is fundamentally opposed to it. “Why is it so much easier to write speculative fiction stories that take place in dystopia where all the worst things our societies have carried out?” Choi asks. “Why is that so much easier and more compelling than writing the opposite of that?”

The cyborgs of Soft Science and Oculus refuse to give up on the potential of technology; they refuse to accept the limits of a cybernetic utopia which relies on the logic of endless consumption. Instead, cognizant of the impossible distance between fantasy and reality, they reimagine the criteria for a posthuman paradise. Dismantling the false technological utopias promised by techno-Orientalist constructions of cyberspace is a labor of love; in their ruin, the poetic cyborg creates space for new possibilities. “But I think in all those [dystopia] stories there are these like pockets of utopia,” concludes Choi. “There’s love that’s being built even in those worlds” (Choi and Smith).

Though it may seem bleak to suggest that cyborgs experience utopia as a haunting, I believe there is a fundamental joy in utopia’s persistence. Choi and Mao launch a critique against the very bounds of the American imagination—faced with the gouache technotopia of the science fiction canon, the cyborg asks: Is this really the best you can do? “Haunting, then, can be
construed as a failed mourning,” Fisher writes, “It is about refusing to give up the ghost or—and
this can sometimes amount to the same thing—the refusal of the ghost to give up on us” (Ghosts
of My Life 45). In Soft Science and Oculus, haunting becomes something precious and
bittersweet: a nagging, dogged hope for a cybernetic future beyond empty promises of
disembodied ecstasy.

Chapter Three: I, Eye: Machine Learning/Machine Language

Introduction

“Why would anyone want to become an object?” asks Franny Choi in her essay “How to
Become an Object.” As the cyborgs in Soft Science and Oculus are painfully aware,
objectification is a violent, ugly process. An object has no agency; no personhood; no desire but
to serve its function. And yet, the cyborg cannot attain (and, perhaps more importantly, does not
want to attain) liberal humanist subjecthood. It is, after all, one of the many unfamiliar racialized
and gendered “Others” against which the liberal humanist subject is defined; for the cyborg to
gain subjectivity, the entire logic of liberal humanism must be destroyed. Nevertheless, the
cyborg seeks recognition. For the poetic cyborg, I argue, this recognition is achieved in the
transformation from object—from instrument and tool—to malfunctioning object. It is achieved
through the oculus and machine learning—through a process of cyborg poetics. No one wants to
be an object—and yet, writes Choi, “it’s hard to imagine wanting to be a person all the time.
How exhausting—all that chattering and burping and remembering and clock-checking, the
constant gagging on one’s failures… Still, all I want is to live to spend another day walking into
rooms and saying, I, I. What a racket.” But are these really the only two options for the cyborg—automatized and Orientalized object or liberal human subject?

In the third and final chapter, I turn my analysis towards building a cohesive theory of knowledge about the poetic cyborg. I am particularly interested in using moments of discomfort, awkwardness, and malfunction as a catalyst for a more holistic understanding of the interplay between race, technology, and desire. To consider Choi and Mao animators of the poetic cyborg, I believe, is to admit their failure. Of the process of writing, Choi claims, “The mechanics of the poem and I are collaborating in order to make something new with language that didn’t belong to either of us to begin with. I’m still in the process of figuring out what a cyborg poetics is” (Quong). The project of *Soft Science*, then, is not animation but *collaboration*. Choi and Mao are not merely attempting to grant the cyborg visibility; in fact, both collections challenge the idea that representation can act as a panacea to marginalization, and the poetic cyborg often struggles to reconcile the entanglement between visibility and vulnerability. What does it mean for the East Asian cyborg to be seen? To be read? “It’s a tricky boundary between spectacle and image,” argues Mao in an interview, “The former implies exploitation, being the unwilling object of a gaze, and the latter implies self-presentation, a performance of self” (Xie).

The following chapter aims to outline a “cyborg poetics” in the context of *Soft Science* and *Oculus*. Though I have borrowed the term from Choi, I will expand it conceptually to include *Oculus*. I will begin negatively, by clarifying what a cyborg poetics is not and what it stands in opposition to. We have already established that cyborg poetics is *not* an animation. If *Soft Science* and *Oculus* give the poetic cyborg a body, it is only as a side effect (or, more aptly, casualty) of speech and language. While Choi and Mao certainly write within the theoretical context of posthumanism, the cyborg poetics of both collections is not strictly bound to the rigid
theories of posthumanism. Neither is a cyborg poetics simply a project of representation, though it may deal intimately with the subject; specifically, it does not seek to incorporate East Asian women within the existing liberal democratic power structure. As such, a cyborg poetics is not interested in traditional humanism; it does not claim the cyborg’s humanity, but rather the human’s cyborg-ness (“remember / all humans / are cyborgs /” writes Choi in “Turing Test_Love,” “all cyborgs / are sharp shards of sky / wrapped in meat”) (69). What differentiates a cyborg poetics from other genres of poetry and literature, then, is the centrality of collaboration—between the poet and Choi’s “mechanics of the poem,” between the poet and the cyborg, between the cyborg and reader. Like Haraway’s cyborg, the poetic cyborg has no holy origin. It is born from the technology of language; a cyborg poetics produces machine from machine. How, then, does the cyborg function within its poetics if not as a mode of subjectivity? Is it a methodology? An allegory? Is it a surrogate speaker for East Asian American women’s collective lost futures? Ultimately, I argue, the cyborg functions within Choi and Mao’s cyborg poetics not as the object of study, but rather as a collaborator in the search for more a liberatory and holistic method of navigating the politics of race, gender, and technological desire.

Choi’s use of the word “poetics”—used either to denote the craft of poetry or a method of literary analysis—is particularly notable in the context of technology. Though Choi’s discussion of “cyborg poetics” is specifically contextualized within the practice of writing poems (i.e., craft), contextualizing the practice of cyborg poetics within a relevant method of analysis allows us to construct an exploratory outline of cyborg poetics as a theory of poetry. In terms of analysis, poetics (as opposed to the meaning-based hermeneutics) is particularly interested in the function and effect of the various parts of a text. This, I believe, is especially compatible with viewing language as a type of technology, as I will discuss later. The meaning and content of
poems within *Soft Science* and *Oculus* (that which is specific to hermeneutics) is often positioned in conflict with the mechanics of the poem (i.e. poetics), producing a vital formal tension. Within the context of this paper, I use the term “cyborg poetics” to refer broadly to the theory of poetry which Choi and Mao develop in *Soft Science* and *Oculus*.

There are three key aspects of Choi and Mao’s cyborg poetics which I examine in the following chapter. First, Choi and Mao foreground tensions between experimental temporalities and the inevitable rush towards “progress.” The cyborg poetics of *Soft Science* and *Oculus*, I argue, presents machine learning as an alternative experience of time that, while superficially appearing to adhere to the relentless forward gaze of development, undermines the idea of machine perfectibility by presenting awkward and discomfiting results. This, I claim, is achieved through a form of malicious compliance in which the poetic cyborg performs its socially required functions to the letter but in a manner which is more frightening and uncanny than desirable. Second, Choi and Mao use and address language as a type of machinic technology in which the functions of its key mechanisms (e.g. stanza, syntax, rhythm) are deliberately exposed. Situating language within the discourse of technological desire forces the reader to adapt to the cyborg’s native form of communication, forcing the reader into an epistemologically inferior position. In this way, language (and what Choi terms the “mechanics of the poem”) become co-conspirators in constructing the relationship between the reader, the poet, and the cyborg. I argue that the cyborg poetics of *Soft Science* and *Oculus* is strongest precisely in the moments of language’s failure: when text becomes mere symbol and words become mere sounds and language cannot (or will not) function smoothly as a technology of communication. Finally, Choi and Mao use visuality (the eye/oculus/camera) as a stage to investigate possibilities for recognition beyond the subject/object binary. The reader does not become a tool for the subjectification of the cyborg;
rather, they are unwittingly drawn into the exploratory collaboration between the cyborg and poet. In other words, the reader becomes a vital part of Choi and Mao’s cyborg poetics. Ultimately, a cyborg poetics begins to take shape in the momentary glitches and failures of technologies of consciousness and communication; its theory of the machine hinges on malfunction as an integral part of function.

**Narrative of Development**

In order to elucidate the relationship between the cyborg and various technologies of language (the book, poem, stanza, etc.), it is necessary to consider the narrative of progress and development. The progress narrative is central to *Soft Science* and *Oculus*, and it is both subverted and subtly reinforced. As Roh et al. argue, “Techno-Orientalism, like Orientalism, places great emphasis on the project of modernity—cultures privilege modernity and fear losing their perceived “edge” over others” (228). It is the relentless pursuit of this “edge” which drives the narrative of progress and development. In the previous chapter, I discussed how Choi and Mao undermine chronology by presenting convoluted timelines and situating the cyborg within both the past and future. The very format of a poetry collection, however, forces the primacy of a particular chronology. Except in cases of deliberate disobedience, the reader is expected to proceed through a collection in order, one page and then another and then another. Even as *Soft Science* and *Oculus* question the plodding sequentiality of development, then, the reader’s prescriptive progress acts to enforce limits to this challenge. While individual poems may reorder time within the borders of the page, the page must always be turned, inevitably restoring the timeline. This is characteristic of a larger trend in *Soft Science* and *Oculus* in which the technologies of language are used in contrast with the content of the poems to foreground
particular tensions and bifurcations. Far from rendering the effort to undermine narratives of
progress inane, the forced chronology of the collection implicates the reader in the fraught
encounter between progress’s inevitability and its perils. The reader becomes responsible—even
complicit—in the project of enforcing chronology and order.

Two poems with the same name—“Oculus”—mark the second and penultimate pieces of
Mao’s collection. Though they share a name, the two poems are radically different: the first
describes the suicide nineteen-year-old girl from Shanghai which was self-recorded and posted
online, while the second recalls R&B singer Solange’s performance in the Guggenheim (Mao
116). Despite their polarity, both poems interrogate the relationship between the eye, the camera,
and the spectacle. The first “Oculus” considers the animating (or, in this case, re-animating)
quality of the camera and recording: the girl “wiped her lens / before she died,” writes Mao,
“The smudge still lives” (8). Mediated by the screen, the camera (or, oculus), then, has the
capability for granting life beyond death. In the second “Oculus,” the eye and then the skylight in
the Guggenheim represent a more metaphorical transcendence. The performance is not one of
death, but of life: “It was spring,” writes Mao, “I was still hopeful” (105).

By bookending the collection with two titular poems, Mao creates a sense of cyclical
ity and futility. Both “Oculus” poems refer to a specific event that occurred less than five years
before the collection was published. Contrasted with the series of poems featuring historical
figures like Afong Moy and Anna May Wong, the “Oculus” duo takes place exclusively in the
modern present. The final “Oculus,” set just a few years after the first, is a return to the
introductory timeline. Despite the journey through disjointed time within Oculus—the strange
blend of history and futurity—the reader finds themselves faced with the same titular poem at the
start and conclusion of the collection. Neither poems, however, are positioned exactly at the
beginning or end of the collection; instead, they are second and penultimate, preceded and
followed respectively with seemingly-unrelated poems. The closed cycle of both poems, then, is
still contextualized within a cohesive narrative: the collection begins with a poem titled “Ghost
Story,” and then continues to the first “Oculus.” As the collection concludes, the second
“Oculus” comes before the final poem “Resurrection.” The timeline of the four poems does not
depict a life cycle, but a warped, out-of-joint death cycle; the first poem depicts a ghost, an
absence (“Ghost Story”); the second a death (“Oculus”); the third a life (“Oculus”), and the
fourth a rebirth (“Resurrection”). (Deleuze and Guattari might call this narrative a distorted
manifestation of the Christ-face, or Year Zero: all the plot points of the traditional story of
sacrifice are accounted for, and yet they are presented out of order.)

Comparing the finale of the two “Oculus” poems elucidates their relationship to the larger
themes of the collection. Notably, both titular poems end with a repetition of the word “burn”:

… She wiped her lens
Before she died. The smudge still lives.

I saw it singe the edge of her bed.
Soon it swallowed the whole burning city. (Mao 7)

At the conclusion of the second and final “Oculus,” the speaker looks through a different
oculus—not a camera, but a skylight:

… We looked up, and there was

a skylight, a dome—the oculus
at the center, through which all fears still burned
and awed. (Mao 105)

That which began to burn in the first “Oculus” “still burn[s]” in the second. There is a tentative
continuity between the two poems, a string stretched taut. The camera-eye and oculus become
the warped lenses through which time is both measured and warped. The use of the word “still” in the final lines of both poems invokes a sense of timelessness. The penultimate line of the second “Oculus” suggests that the fears have been burning for some time (perhaps for the entire duration of the collection), but it is only after the speaker gazes at it through the oculus that it becomes important or notable. Technology of visuality (the oculus/camera/eye), then, is central to the epistemological framework of *Oculus* (though it is not, as we will establish later, the foundation of the framework itself).

Spatially and temporally, the landscapes of both poems are superimposed onto one another. In the first “Oculus,” Mao writes, “How the dead girl fell, awaiting a hand to hold, / eyes to behold her as the lights clicked on” (7). In the second: “We looked up, and there was / a skylight” (Mao 105). The final stanzas in the second “Oculus” provide the “dead girl” with eyes to behold her: the gaze of a crowd “without cameras / except our eyes and our faces” (Mao 104). The girl is no longer limited to the cold gaze of a live feed which is incapable of providing the recognition (the holding and beholding) she craves; instead, the smudge—the proof of her life—lives and burns all the way through until the end of the collection of poems, where it is witnessed without recording. The oculus links both poems spatially: it is through the Guggenheim’s oculus that the crowd sees that which “still burned”: the fears, the smudged remnants of the girl’s action. Notably, both the ledge that the girl jumped from and the skylight in the Guggenheim function as windows—exits, entryways, and screens to be seen through. Ultimately, the second “Oculus” resolves what the first leaves in question. Close readings of the two titular poems not only break down the mechanics of poetry which Mao relies on to construct a sense of simultaneity and cyclicality, but also begin to reveal an alternative form of recognition situated outside of the subject/object binary that is facilitated through the oculus.
Machine Learning

Consider, again, the machine learning to walk. It learns by trial-and-error, by trips and falls that become incorporated into the movement itself—clumsy destruction made intentional. Machine learning, I argue, is central to Choi and Mao’s cyborg poetics. At the same time as the cyborg speakers of Soft Science and Oculus engage in machine learning as a form of malicious compliance with the mandate of technological perfectibility, Choi and Mao’s collaboration with what Choi terms the “mechanics of language” centers the algorithmic evolution. In other words, machine learning subtly undermines the relentless chronology of the progress narrative while appearing on the surface to fall in line with its core concepts.

In “A Brief History of Cyborgs,” Choi writes:

I once made my mouth a technology of softness. I listened carefully as I drank. I made the tools fuck in my mouth—okay, we can say pickle if it’s easier to hear—until they birthed new ones. What I mean is: I learned (14).

On the second page of the poem, she continues:

I made my mouth a jar until technology squirmed and bubbled. I scooped up the foam and called it language. The audience applauded. To prove them wrong, I became a screen of lights. I had no thighs at all. [...] Can machines think / come here let me show you / ask me again (15).

Machine learning, then, is central to the speaker’s relationship with speech and language. By evoking the process of fermentation with words like “pickle,” “jar,” and “foam,” Choi makes strange a familiar natural process, drawing to mind the statistical patterns of association found in AI language algorithms. Even organic processes of creation like fermentation can be contaminated by the relentless drive for progress and ever-perfected technology, and by referring to the act of pickling as making “the tools fuck in my mouth,” Choi challenges the distinction
between natural/familiar and machinic/strange. Importantly, both machine learning and fermentation are transformations that occur independent of outside influence.

Like videos of AI learning to walk, the end result of the cyborg learning to speak is unexpectedly grotesque: “Come in,” the cyborg speaker says of her mouth, “Make yourselves at home” (Choi 15). Directly following its invention of language, this is the first and only instance in the poem where the cyborg speaks. Language, a skill that the cyborg has developed through the process of machine learning, is transformed into the cyborg’s own tool. “I opened my glittering jaw,” it continues, “My hunger, too, has both hard and soft parts” (Choi 15). The malicious compliance of machine learning affords the cyborg a measure of disembodiment and therefore protection (“I had no thighs at all”) from spectacle, challenging what Chun refers to as cyberspace’s unsustainable “binary of disembodied mind… and embodied and orientalized other” (“Orienting Orientalism” 119).

Object/Subject

The construction of the (techno-)Orient as a host for the imperial core’s fears and fantasies is wholly dependent on the bifurcation of the (white, male, liberal, liberated, etc.) subject and the (Asian, female, backwards, oppressed, etc.) object. As we have established, the cyborg (and by extension a cyborg poetics) does not necessarily seek subjecthood. Indeed, it is the limits of subjecthood itself which the cyborg aims to escape; within the confines of the techno-Orient, the subject must always be defined against the (East Asian feminine) object it gazes upon. Like language, visual technologies of
subjecthood often operate within discourses of techno-Orientalism as tools in the production of the mechanized and Orientalized “other.” As Warren Liu observes, “The constitution of the liberal humanist subject is intimately connected to the process of objectification and dehumanization that demarcate the line between “human” and other” (4). A cyborg poetics, then, must address and complicate the objectifying gaze without reinforcing the dependent and dichotomous relationship between the subject and object. In other words, while the gaze and its various tools of observation (oculus, film, camera) are certainly vital stages upon which recognition is performed and denied, they must not be mistaken for the origin of the subject. Like desire, visuality is a technology. In *Writings on Diaspora*, Rey Chow argues:

To approach visuality as the object of criticism, we cannot therefore simply attack the fact that women have been reduced to objects of the “male gaze,” since that reifies the problem by reifying its most superficial manifestation. If we take visuality to be, precisely, the nature of the social object that feminism should undertake to criticize, then it is incumbent upon us to analyze the epistemological foundation that supports it. It is, indeed, a foundation in the sense that the production of the West’s “others” depends on a logic of visuality that bifurcates “subjects” and “objects” into the incompatible positions of intellectuality and spectacularity (60).

*Soft Science* and *Oculus* are particularly concerned with methods of subjectification and objectification. If we consider, as Chow argues, the “gaze” to be merely a tool of the larger epistemological infrastructure of the subject/object bifurcation, then subjecthood can be determined by those who “use” the tool (i.e., those who “gaze”), and objecthood by those who are “used upon” (those who are “gazed at,” or made spectacle). This is particularly apt considering the historiography of technology, which has traditionally located humanity in the ability to use tools. A cyborg poetics does not aspire to secure recognition via “mastering” or “using” the tools of subjecthood, but rather looks beyond the subject/object binary to collaborate
with them. Nevertheless, Soft Science and Oculus are painfully cognizant of the power of observation. As Sally Wen Mao argues:

In the American context, the racialized feminine Asian body is both a spectacle and an absence, coveted and reviled at the same time... Asian women’s bodies, and marginalized bodies in general, have always existed at the intersection of attraction and revulsion... The reality is that representation always implies a kind of invisibility, muteness. (Xie)

Within Oculus, Mao writes several persona poems from the point of view of historical figures Afong Moy and Anna May Wong. The lives of Moy and Wong are particularly relevant in the context of this dual “spectacle and absence.” Moy is widely regarded as the first Chinese woman in America, and garnered such notoriety that she toured with a traveling circus on display. Wong, a famous Chinese actor from the early twentieth century, epitomized the Dragon Lady and Lotus Blossom tropes on screen, unable to play larger parts due to anti-Chinese legislation in Hollywood. Though Wong protested the limiting roles, playing doomed or tragic support to the white protagonist was the only representation available for Asian actors. The locus of both Moy and Wong’s “performance” was their bodies; spectacle was their livelihood.

In Moy’s case, her financial success (and, therefore, her survival) depended wholly on her novelty, her ability to constantly manufacture shock and newness; when the shine of her notoriety wore off, she was left unceremoniously at a poorhouse. Rey Chow argues that spectacle is a key axis upon which the Orientalized “Other” is constructed. The technological, she suggests, is often deeply entangled with spectactularity: to be “automatized” “means becoming a spectacle whose “aesthetic” power increases with one’s increasing awkwardness and helplessness” (Chow 61). The work of spectacle, then, is unique in that it is impossible to be

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9 Similar to mechanization, automatization can be understood broadly as the process of taking on the characteristics of a machine. In this case, it is a distinctly racialized and gendered method of enforcing sensorial power cues: the automaton either does not know its own awkwardness or cannot change it. Central to the automatization of East Asian women is the assumption that they are incapable of feeling pain and or displeasure; doll-like, the automaton exists only as an instrument of service—of spectacle.
The only way to be adept at the performance of spectacle, in other words, is to fail at it—to be ungainly, inhuman, and uncanny. Automatization, then, is not a technology of the future; on the contrary, it is undeniably historical. This, I argue, is one of Mao’s key points in referencing Moy and Wong. Even by writing Moy into poetry, Mao risked reinforcing the confines of her spectacularity. She writes:

There are no first-person research materials on Afong Moy. Every record of Afong Moy is from the perspective of a white person looking at her. This dynamic interests me: when researching, I was keenly aware of a white male gaze that controls the image of these women… In translating my research to the poems, I deliberately considered what it actually meant for these women to be token bodies placed on display for a rapt audience who at the same time actively discriminated against them.

For East Asian women (and, by extension the racialized feminized cyborg), Haraway’s “historically constituted body” is one of inescapable performance. “The show must go on,” writes Mao in “The Diary of Afong Moy,” “And on and on, replaced by another show, and that’s the trouble / with artifice. It never ends” (66). Recall Derrida’s musing “repetition and first time”: to Moy, the key to artifice—to spectacle—was replicating the sense of newness and otherness that so fascinated white viewers. While her white audience was often seeing a Chinese woman for the first time, Moy herself was “performing” for the tenth, twentieth, hundredth time. In writing about Moy and Wong alongside the cyborg, Mao creates a science fiction narrative that, to borrow from Seo-Young Chu, “evokes[timelessness through a poetics of anachronism whereby disparate chronological eras are somehow juxtaposed, brought into ghostly superimposition, or compelled to hover in one another’s vicinity” (30). By embedding narratives of the future within historical speakers, Mao manufactures a sense of temporal uneasiness or displacement (even “out of joint”-ness) which is essential to the cyborg poetics of both *Soft Science* and *Oculus.*
In her essay “How to Become an Object,” Choi considers the complicated politics of desire. She recalls watching pornography videos featuring the RealDoll brand of sex dolls as research for *Soft Science*, drawn to the blurry space between human and object. In one video, an actor who Choi previously believed to be a doll is revealed to be a real woman only ten minutes into the scene. She writes:

Maybe what I felt when I watched the woman trying to become a doll wasn’t arousal but love. That is, I admired her for being a better object than I could ever be; I loved her for refusing, ultimately, to be one. For staying so still, for severing her smile from the horrors happening below, for being so useful, so perfectly useful—and then for failing. In gagging—that tiniest, unprogrammable gag—she failed, finally, to disappear into the smooth gears of all that makes us into objects. She broke, and I blinked. And somewhere between I, and I, a door swung open.

“How to Become an Object” links the history of desire and technology, drawing on Sarah Ahmed’s interpretation of Heidegger. “When the hammer is working,” writes Ahmed, “it disappears from view. When something stops working or cannot be used, it intrudes into consciousness” (21). According to Chow, spectacle is a language of visual power predicated on a sense of the object’s “awkwardness” (Chow 61). The uncanniness of the cyborg, then, is located in its automatization. Its spectacularity originates not from the fear that it might not be fully human, but from the fear that it might not be fully machine—from man’s inability to, in Heidegger’s words, “‘get’ technology ‘intelligently in hand’” (313). It is this uncertainty, I argue, that is key to Choi and Mao’s cyborg poetics and the alternative method of recognition therein, located in the cyborg’s intrusion into consciousness. In other words, the cyborg’s humanity can be understood as a failure to function properly as a machine.

Though it should be clear by now that the poetic cyborg is no psychoanalytic subject, Sigmund Freud’s theory of the uncanny provides a vital example of recognition predicated on discomfort. I am not claiming that the uncanny should be directly grafted onto the cyborg, but
rather than situating *Soft Science* and *Oculus* within existing discourses of automatized recognition produces a more holistic understanding of technologies of the subject. In elaborating on the methods of manufacturing uncanniness, Freud cites Ernst Jentsch, who claims:

> In telling a story, one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton; and to do it in such a way that his attention is not directly focused upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be urged to go into the matter and clear it up immediately, since that, as we have said, would quickly dissipate the peculiar emotional effect of the thing.

Though Choi and Mao’s poetic cyborg certainly falls under Jentsch’s initial parameters of an uncanny figure, they are quite explicitly preoccupied with the problem of their uncanniness, with the precarity of their machinic humanity. In fact, the many poems in *Soft Science* and *Oculus* focus directly on this dilemma: Choi’s “Turing Test” series, for example, and Mao’s persona poems.

Choi’s emphasis on the Turing Test in *Soft Science* reflect’s Ahmed’s analysis of Heidegger—for a cyborg to “fail” the Turing Test (i.e. reveal its nascent humanity) it must stop functioning smoothly as a machine. In the final stanza of “Turing Test,” the second poem in *Soft Science*, the cyborg speaker is asked “// do you believe you have consciousness.” The speaker replies, “sometimes / when the sidewalk / opens my knee, i think / please / please let me / remember this” (Choi 3). It is not necessarily the pain of a skinned knee that the speaker fixates on, but rather the mundanity of the fall (the “opening” of the knee). The act of stumbling—the glitch; the gag; the sudden subtle failure of machinery—is how the cyborg (to use Ahmed’s analysis) “intrudes into consciousness,” both literally and figuratively (Ahmed 21). In fact, several of Choi’s “Turing Test” series conclude with the speaker recalling or asserting either
injury or failure. In the final stanza of “Turing Test_Empathetic Response,” the speaker answers a question with an anecdote from a medical procedure.

// how can we know that these are not simply simulated emotions

the nurse missed / my vein / & dug for it / it was a white light / a tin flame in /
the forearm / fluorescent / sick vinyl / what else can i say / i opened / i cried / &
the needle / drank

Here, the proper function (in this case, drawing blood or other fluids) of the cyborg speaker’s body is interrupted to such an extent that the nurse is forced to “dig” for the vein and the cyborg becomes an inconvenience. It is in this malfunction that the speaker locates the legitimacy of their emotions (“what else can i say / i opened / i cried”). Note the repetition of the word “open” in reference to the experience of pain in both “Turing Test” and “Turing Test_Empathetic Response”; Choi often uses “opening” to denote moments in which the cyborg’s body is transgressed, willingly or not.

Manufactured Recognition

Central to Choi and Mao’s cyborg poetics, I claim, is a manufactured and forced encounter between the reader and the cyborg. Keeping in mind Chow’s assertion that the gaze is not the origin of the subject/object bifurcation but merely one of its many manifestations, let us return briefly to hauntology. The politics of visuality feature prominently in Specters of Marx. Notably, hauntology does not locate subjecthood in the act of seeing, but rather in the act of being seen—of being watched by that which haunts. The specter itself is not a subject; it is “some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other” (Derrida 5). Ultimately, the specter (that which watches) is the anonymous ‘thing’ against which the subject (e.g. Hamlet) is defined. “This Thing meanwhile looks at us and sees us not see it
even when it is there,” writes Derrida, “A spectral asymmetry interrupts here all specularity. It de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony. We will call this the visor effect: we do not see who looks at us” (6). Contrary to traditional subject-object construction of visual culture (wherein the epistemologically privileged subject is defined by gazing upon the spectacular object), Derrida’s hauntology positions subjecthood in the act of anachronous recognition. In cases relevant to the visor effect, recognition occurs even without the subject’s awareness.

The East Asian poetic cyborg, on the other hand, is distinctly aware of being watched; everything about it (Asianess/womanhood/machinery) is forcibly made spectacle. This, I argue, facilitates a method of subject recognition that is unlike Hegel’s dialectic; the recognition is one-sided and manufactured. Importantly, the recognition achieved by the poetic cyborg is not that of the liberal human subject; instead it is recognition by force, by accident. Comparing Choi’s poem “Shokushu Goukan for the Cyborg Soul” and Mao’s poem “Live Feed” elucidates the cyborg’s complex relationship to subjecthood and visuality. Both poems address the tension between visibility, vulnerability, and absence, and reading them side-by-side allows the juxtaposition of two unique forms of digital visuality (animated pornography and live streams).

“Shokushu Goukan for the Cyborg Soul” references an often-animated genre of pornography colloquially dubbed “tentacle porn.” Originating from a loophole of Japan’s genital censorship laws (wherein an explicit video depicts “tentacles” or other nonhuman appendages instead of actual genitals), the genre has since become a staple of animated pornography. Notably, pornography involving monsters or borderline bestiality like tentacle porn frequently features nonconsensual or dubiously consensual encounters; in fact, blurred consent is often part of the appeal of the genre. This is especially important to consider given the racialization of tentacle porn: as the genre has gained popularity in America and Europe, it has become strongly
associated with East Asia. The helplessness and unwilling hypersexuality of the animated girl becomes a site for white viewers to play out fantasies of domination and fetish, the East Asian object of desire cyborg-ified through the limitless access of the internet.

Choi begins by contrasting the scripted monstrosity and vulnerability of the tentacle pornography genre: “When it’s demon cephalopod versus schoolgirl, it should be obvious / whose eyes to take. Nothing is more frightening than looking / and loving what you see” (28). The enjambment between “looking” and “loving what you see” effectively isolates the first half of the line to “nothing is more frightening than looking.” Though watching pornography (especially animated pornography) is often depicted as passive consumption, Choi rejects this by directly linking the act of seeing to the threat of violence (i.e., “eyes to take”). In other words, Choi implicates the role of visuality in constructing the binary between subject (the white male viewer) and object (the Asian-coded monster and schoolgirl). The first two lines prepare what I believe to be an important argument of the poem, that the primary contradiction of the imagined video is not between “demon cephalopod” and “schoolgirl,” but between the viewer and the performers. Indeed, the reader’s perspectival position is implicitly aligned with that of the (white male) viewer consuming the pornographic video, producing an uncomfortable voyeurism.

Early in “Live Feed,” Mao invokes a similar reference to visuality: “In a minute my arrest / will go live, handcuff you to your bed. / It’s starting: I watch you watch me. / I watch you lurk me, my starling” (14). Contrary to Derrida’s visor effect, Mao’s speaker is painfully aware of their audience. The context of a “live feed” adds a particular immediacy, both in regards to the double-meaning of “live” as a mandate for survival and in the context of a live transmission as a real-time occurrence with no time buffer for edits or censorship. Unlike the scripted and often predictable pornographic encounter in “Shokushu Goukan for the Cyborg Soul,” the very nature
of a “live feed” includes an aspect of uncertainty and spontaneity. There is still, however, a sense of inevitability in the initial use of the simple future tense (“My arrest will go live”); the urgency of a live broadcast is ultimately juxtaposed with the prophetic unavoidability of the simple present.

Both “Shokushu Goukan for the Cyborg Soul” and “Live Feed” use aquatic imagery to illustrate the porosity between humanity and monstrosity, especially in regards to experiencing and enacting violence. “I am only a cuttlefish lying open-jawed on the sand,” writes Choi, “A squid flashing red as it pulls a fishgirl into its beak” (28). Similarly, Mao claims, “I am a fish and a pariah / drying in my oubliette… Thrash / against my pincers” (15). By amalgamating images of the natural world with representations of a high-tech future, both poems alienate the reader from the cyborg’s experience of personhood. References to the ocean in “Shokushu Goukan” are especially notable considering Choi’s assertion in the first poem of the collection that sea is the “antonym” of machine (1). As Haraway claims, “The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is trans-gressed” (68).

Additionally, both poems heavily feature themes of feeding and/or consumption, both implicating the reader in the visual consumption of the cyborg and threatening to return the favor. Even the title “Live Feed” contains the dual-meaning of a “live feeding,” though it is somewhat unclear whether the second-person addressee or the speaker is being consumed. In contrast to the simple future tense in the beginning of the poem, “Live Feed” concludes in the simple present, creating an increasing sense of urgency and immediacy:

I feed you my limbs
in this glass container. I limn
you with this fodder
and you taste.
By parallelling two homonyms ("limb" and "limn"), Mao further emphasizes the visuality of reading; both words are auditorily identical, and can only be distinguished by sight. Additionally, by isolating “and you taste” in the last line, Mao leaves uncertainty as to who, exactly, is doing the tasting. It is only in the final lines of the poem when the title comes to fruition; explicitly referencing the act of feeding in the simple present tense completes the second meaning of a “live feed” and reinforces the cyclicity of the poem.

The hunger in “Shokushu Goukan” is much more desperate:

… I am

just trying to sleep. To feed. To fill
myself and grow larger from it.

Or: I am only trying to slither back into my first skin.

Or: I am only trying to remember how it felt not to leak.

“Shokushu Goukan,” too, foregrounds cyclicity: that of filling and emptying, the totalizing force of desire.

Explicit references to visuality combined with imagery of consumption produce a fraught encounter between the reader and the speakers of the two poems in which the reader is forced to confront their complicity in the cyborg’s spectacularization. The page becomes a surrogate for the screen, in which the reader, by visually consuming the poem, implicitly aligns themselves with the viewer of both digital displays (i.e., the shokushu and the live feed), seeking out the fantasy of cybernetic touch in the promised depth behind the screen. The use of the second person in “Live Feed” further emphasizes the incrimination of the reader: “I watch you watch me,” writes Mao [emphasis added] (15). The encounter, then, occurs not between the viewer and the performer, but between the reader and the cyborg who are assigned the aforementioned
scripted roles. Nevertheless, this indictment of the reader is not damning, but rather an interrogation of the visual technologies of subjecthood; of the very act of reading. It is an invitation for the reader (especially if they, like the cyborg, are marginalized through mechanization) to join the poet and the cyborg in their collaboration.

In “Shokushu Goukan” and “Live Feed,” the field of digital performance is a mechanism used to expose the apparatus of spectacle and absence that Mao identifies as key to the objectification of East Asian women. As Mao observes:

To occupy this space, this body, is disorienting and at times disturbing, because you are never quite sure whose gaze you can trust, whose gaze truly sees you beyond the projections and assumptions and desires. You’re not even sure you can trust your own desire, because you wonder how much of that is an internalization of all your deficiencies and failures to conform to someone else’s fantasies (mao interview)

The cyborg, as we have established again and again, does not seek inclusion in the ranks of the liberal humanist subject. Instead, the recognition it engenders is predicated on the discomfort of the reader: like Jentsch and Freud’s uncanny, a cyborg poetics produces an encounter that uses the reader’s uneasiness as a platform to question categories of difference.

Undeniably, the cyborg often falls within the purview of the uncanny valley, though whether this is a result of its automatization or its racialization (or both, as Chow might argue) remains less certain. Unlike Freud and Jentsch’s version of the uncanny, however, the uncanny encounter within a cyborg poetics not only encourages the reader to question the limits of human subjecthood, but also to question their own role in enforcing them. The recognition facilitated by a cyborg poetics does not attempt to negatively delineate a clear self as many other epistemological frameworks do, but rather opens the possibility of transcending existing structures of subjecthood by revealing them to be intrinsically insufficient. The cyborg and other uncanny technologies (automatons, robots, AI, etc.) represent a glitch in the construction of the
liberal human subject; a cyborg poetics merely expands and exploits this glitch. “So I am both the woman holding the camera and the woman / being opened by it,” writes Choi, “nothing special about that” (28). Instead of using the cyborg exclusively as an objective tool to negatively define the subject, Choi and Mao collaborate with the cyborg using technologies of visuality (the eye/oculus/camera) to reveal the fractured and fragile nature of the subject/object bifurcation.

The Mechanics of Language

Like technologies of the uncanny, language itself can, in certain circumstances, constitute an erosion. After all, if language is often employed to enforce notions of otherness, then fragmenting the stratifications of syntax can produce opportunities for a reimagining of subjectivity. It is precisely these cracks in which a cyborg poetics finds its shape, defined in the negative space left behind in moments of discomfort.

Soft Science opens with a “Glossary of Terms” that functions both as an introductory poem and as a code to decipher the rest of the collection. “Glossary of Terms,” I argue, primes the reader to consider language as a technology and is therefore integral to the construction of a cyborg poetics within Soft Science. The glossary creates a network of signifiers related to essential themes of the book, anchored in four main words (star, ghost, mouth, and sea). Formatting the poem as a chart visually isolates each aspect of the glossary, foregrounding the relationship of the part and the whole (see fig. 1). Though visually separated, many of the short stanzas contain overlapping content: “mouth… dreams of being… the sea”; star’s antonym is “fish”; “mouth” is its own antonym (Choi 1). “I think when we play with form what we’re engaging with is the technology of the poem,” writes Choi, “And so when I play with form, what
I’m doing is saying that I’m a coauthor of this text along with the machine of poetry—the mechanics of the lyric” (Quong).

Fig. 1

Once again, tension between the content and the technology of the poem (in this case, form) highlights a key bifurcation within the collection (that of the part and the whole; the mechanics to the machine). The table format of the poem forms a sort of screen which is
intended to be *seen thorough*; it is the superficial visual isolation which allows the reader to see not only that “star,” “ghost,” “mouth,” and “sea” are co-constituted, but that even ideas of “origin” “meaning” and “antonym” are contextualized within a shared discourse of technology and desire. To be both conscious and conscientious of language as a machine, then, is to carefully examine and present its separate parts in pursuit of the whole without compromising either. In contrast to Haraway’s irony, which is “about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically,” the machine of language outlined in “Glossary of Terms” finds resolution *in* contradiction: mouth is itself *and* its antonym (65). The resolution—the whole—does not compromise the tension of the parts; rather, it is the tension itself which produces the whole.

In approaching language as a machine, Choi emphasizes its fallibility: like any other tool, language malfunctions both accidentally and as a deliberate (or, at least, inescapable) result of its epistemological limitations. It is in these moments of collapse and impairment, I argue, that the core of a cyborg poetics is revealed. “There are hundreds of videos of huskies / saying *I love you* without meaning to—moans warped by an anxious, animal howl” Choi writes in “It’s All Fun and Games Until Someone Gains Consciousness” (59). The meaning of language, particularly as it relates to desire, Choi suggests, is often coerced or coincidental. “I reach up inside myself,” writes Choi, “move my mouth. / I make it do terrible things, terrible” (60). Ultimately, meaning as a function or mechanic of language is compromised, especially in the context of the racialized and feminized cyborg. The uncertainty of meaning is especially notable as it relates to poetics: if language, like any other machine, glitches and defects, then hermeneutics alone (i.e. relying solely on meaning-based interpretations of a text) is an insufficient method of analysis. The
machine itself must be interrogated and examined, not simply its function. Choi is (in all fairness, perhaps unintentionally) making a case for the use of poetics.

By highlighting moments in which the machine of language is broken and sabotaged, Choi moves beyond the surface-level representational politics of “giving the cyborg a voice.” Instead, she challenges the very concept of what it means to speak. Language, as a technology which is integral to producing the subject negatively in relation to the object, is equally complicit in the cyborg’s objectification as it is in its liberation. Choi writes:

I think foreignness is one of the many things that can place a person in the uncanny valley—that horror/humor of perceived emulation of humanity. I know that in some ways, no matter how perfect my English is, no matter how I sound on the phone, no matter how annoyingly good my grammar is, I’ll always be seen as someone doing, at best, an extraordinarily good job at emulating a native speaker. But I think it’s a beautiful gift to have grown up with the understanding that all English is broken; all English is breakable. I have no respect for the sanctity of English.

The poetic cyborg’s words in Soft Science are not empowering or inspiring; they are repetitive, deliberately disconcerting, and almost grotesquely cyclical.

The double bind of spectacle and absence that Mao identifies is a perfectly formulated dilemma, trapping the East Asian cyborg into a glass cage where any refusal or attempt to escape spectactularity is brutally and efficiently transformed into further spectacle and any claim of subjection becomes white noise. What does it mean, then, to write for and about the cyborg if language itself is often complicit in engendering the very spectactularity and absence that have so frequently relegated the cyborg to tool and plot point? Is it even possible to discuss the cyborg without reproducing the conditions of spectacle? Of the garish and violent collision of revulsion and desire? What is the poem, after all, if not another stage for the cyborg to perform “her awful, crooked dance”? (“Isn’t that what you paid for?” asks Choi. “Isn’t that what you came / to see?” (34)).
In “Chi,” Choi imagines a conversation with a robot from the manga *Chobits*, “whom the protagonist salvages from a dumpster and names after the only sound she is able to make” (39). The poem is an indictment of language, broken into four sections: I. Voice, II. Vocabulary, III. Conjugation, and IV. Cognates. The third section is almost entirely made up of the word “chi,” with minor variations (chip, cheap, clit, chick). By the top of the second page, the repeating word has changed into “click,” marking a transformation from exclamation to action. “Click” evokes associations of a trackpad or screen; the repeated action of “clicking a button” implies the mindless cycle of internet browsing. It is inaction *through* action, words made data through repetition. “What could you have offered,” asks the speaker in I. Voice, “but your body’s only / dirty syllable?” (Choi 40). For Chi, and for many Asian Americans, voice becomes the method through which she is denoted as inhuman or Other. Named after the only word she speaks, she is quite literally defined by her limited communication. Even the form of the first section—short lines made up of even shorter phrases broken by white space—is reminiscent of a halting pattern of speech. Two question marks make up the only punctuation, further indicating uncertainty. Language, however, is not an exclusively repressive constraint to Chi. The poem suggests that Chi’s limited vocabulary could be read as a form of resistance: “Teach me… to say no / name but my own,” the speaker begs Chi (Choi 40). The key to the cyborg’s self-recognition lies in the raw, jagged cracks of rigid communication; in the empty space left behind after the collapse of the English language. In other words, language is closest to a cyborg poetics when it stops functioning properly as a tool—when its prescriptivity is corroded and it—like the hammer which without a head becomes nothing more than a long stick—“intrudes into consciousness” (Ahmed 21).
Conclusion

The poems in *Soft Science* and *Oculus* expose and reject the visual mechanisms of subjectivity even as they reproduce them, a tense cyclicality which is mirrored in both form and content. “Poems are technologies of consciousness,” insists Choi (Coomes). What differentiates Choi and Mao’s cyborg poetics from other methodologies of literature and subjectivity is its devotion to discomfort. A cyborg poetics, I believe, takes shape precisely in the malfunctions of technologies of communication; in the bitter, awkward march toward a perfect machine; in the space between subject and object, between *I* and *eye*—in the disjointed, uneasy recognition between the reader and the poetic cyborg.

Conclusion

Reading *Soft Science* and *Oculus* in my second year at Wellesley was eerily like standing on the wrong side of a mirror—I felt not as though I recognized myself in the cyborg, but as if the cyborg recognized *itself* in *me*. Like many East Asian Americans, my relationship to gender is complicated. Due to time restraints, gender and queerness have been left primarily in subtext for the majority of this thesis. Ultimately, however, I believe it is a vital context when discussing the cyborg, so I have elected to share an abbreviated exploration on the topic below as a way to close out my analysis.

Donna Haraway suggests that the cyborg as a methodology opens pathways to transcending gender as a social stratification of difference and power in pursuit of a fully inclusive feminism. The cyborg, she claims, is “a creature in a post-gender world” (67). For the Asian cyborg, however, gender is a boundary that is not so easily transgressed. While Asians more broadly are gendered as deviant in order to moralize and justify the sustained violence and
displacement of imperialism, East Asian women specifically are hyperfeminized—limited to
caricatures of passivity. Being rendered as gender-deviant and being hyperfeminized are not
incompatible; in fact, hyperfemininity, while constructed deliberately to center white
heterosexual desire, can be understood as a form of gender deviancy. Though the
hyperfeminization of East Asian women is naturalized through discourses of scientific racism,
it is also seen as an aberration from the norm of white womanhood, reflecting the ways in which
women of color are denied meaningful ties to womanhood while simultaneously suffering the
entangled effects of patriarchy and white supremacy. When cyborgs are so often paralleled to
East Asian women, it is idealistic to claim that they are creatures from a post-gender world.
Though they may herald a post-gender world through the promise of disembodiment and
freedom from the physical, cyborgs are distinctly, painfully gendered.

Haraway’s claim, however, reveals an important tension between the natural and the
fabricated. I believe Haraway was partially correct: cyborgs present an opportunity to erode the
ways that gender is naturalized through discourses of the organic. As unnatural and uncanny
technological beings, cyborgs can unveil the clandestine mechanics of gender—those which are
often obscured beneath “biological” notions of gender essentialism. That is to say, the cyborg’s
claim on the organic is fraught with controversy. It is not fully natural or biological, and
yet—curiously—it is undeniably gendered.

Soft Science in particular uses language of the organic—particularly aquatic imagery—to
complicate gender. In the very first poem “Glossary of Terms,” Choi establishes that the sea is
the antonym of “machine.” Unlike the machine, it is natural. In contrast to the cyborg, which is
inexorably entangled with fantasy, the sea “does not dream; is only dreamed of” (1). Almost
immediately, however, Choi begins to muddle this distinction. The machine speaker in “Turing Test_Love” urges:

do not try to prove your / what is the word / humanity / you are organic / plum-hearted / oyster-throated / & lined / yes / with metal / remember / where all that silicon comes from / for the ocean so loved / the quartz / feldspar / the tiny homes of tiny creatures / that she ground them / into sand / to keep them close / to kiss them with / well / i suppose you would call it / a mouth (69).

By mixing the cyborg’s origin with the sea, Choi makes the language of nature unfamiliar and uneasy. The personification of the sea is clunky, humanity grafted onto it with no small degree of uncertainty (“i supposed you would call it / a mouth”) (Choi 69). Neither the sea nor the cyborg, after all, are fully human—interestingly, however, both are distinctly gendered. In Soft Science, the cyborg’s fragmented gender is best understood through the intersection between imagery of the “sea” and imagery of its supposed antonym, “machine.” “Blurring the confines of my own identity is a way of embodying a kind of queerness,” observes Choi in an interview about Soft Science for the Paris Review. “I started to think about my affinity for certain images, like the cyborg and the squid, the cephalopods. There are a lot of cephalopods in this book and I keep writing about them—because octopuses will inherit the earth. My affinity for certain images was a way of taking up the incoherence of my gender identity” [emphasis added] (Quong).

Images of the aquatic, I argue, function in Soft Science as a way to defamiliarize the natural, thus calling into question the very foundations of the distinction between nature and machine—and, more broadly, between that which is naturalized and that which is manufactured (i.e., gender). Ultimately, Soft Science suggests that the sea is just as unnatural as the cyborg, just as compromised by the violence of desire. In “Beg,” Choi writes:

a man barges through the screen
to hook his fingers through my mouth.

i’m a fish market. i’m flattening into the bed.
rolled out. cooking off the rotten bits.

Through its association with gender, the aquatic is made unfamiliar. It becomes language of injury and consumption: the penetration of the fishhook; the sale at the market; the cooking. Superimposed onto a scene where gendered dynamics take precedence, the sea is transformed into a tool of estrangement—highlighting, as Choi claims, the incoherency of the cyborg’s gender. Here, the screen once again functions as a failed boundary, an impotent protection from touch and domination.

Conversely, in “Making Of,” Choi does not use aquatic imagery, but nonetheless challenges the naturalized aspects of gendered performance which are grafted onto the cyborg:

When a cyborg puts on a dress,
it’s called drag.

When a cyborg gets down
on her knees, it’s called
behavior.

Both “Beg” and “Making Of” describe a thorny encounter with gender and desire mediated through technology, and both include an implicit racialization encoded in assumptions of compliance and submission. In fact, associations with hypersexuality and submission are ultimately the methods through which the cyborg is both gendered and racialized as an East Asian woman. Hypersexuality is so embedded in the popular imagination of cyborgs, Choi points out, that acts of submissive desire (the cyborg getting “down on her knees”) are presumed to be rote; almost banal. By using “down on her knees” instead of a simpler phrase (such as “kneeling”), Choi highlights the action of lowering oneself: submission is encoded in the very
phrasing of the poem. The cyborg’s experience of gender, then, is inseparable from being racialized as East Asian. Additionally, Choi suggests that the cyborg is queercoded (“When a cyborg puts on a dress, / it’s called drag”). This marks another way in which hyperfemininity can be understood as a form of gender deviancy: like that of East Asian women, the cyborg’s femininity is seen as a mark of its difference. By blurring the distinction between naturalized and manufactured (both implicitly, via aquatic images, and explicitly), Choi opens doors towards a more nuanced conception of gender outside the framework of gender essentialism. Thus, while Haraway’s claim that the cyborg represents a transcendence of gender is based on false assumptions of white universality, it does bear some merit. What does it mean, asks Choi, to be genderqueer in a hypertechnological future? How can understanding the ways in which gender is mediated through technology and mechanization facilitate a move towards gender-liberation?

In this thesis, I pursued a close reading of the figure of the cyborg in Franny Choi’s *Soft Science* and Sally Wen Mao’s *Oculus* with the goal of building a more holistic understanding of the intersections of race, technology, and desire. After analyzing the role of cyberspace in constructing the cyborg and its associated hypertechnological future, I made a case for the use of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s faciality machine as a method of analysis through which to understand the relationship between the cyborg-as-face and cyberspace-as-landscape. In order to explore the complicated, cyclical depiction of time in *Soft Science* and *Oculus*, I coupled Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher’s hauntology with an understanding of temporal difference as a method of racialization to argue that Choi and Mao’s cyborg is haunted by the lost future of the cybernetic utopia. Finally, I claimed that the cyborg poetics within *Soft Science* and *Oculus* is characterized by the use of machine learning to undermine narratives of development, the employment of visual technologies of subjectivity as tools to facilitate a jarring and disjointed
contact between the reader and the cyborg, and an unraveling of language as an imperfect and malfunctioning machine. Ultimately, the cyborg in *Soft Science* and *Oculus* is most poignant in moments of discontinuity and malfunction, where the pretense of perfection is forcibly peeled back to reveal the gleaming machine—“plum-hearted / oyster-throated”—beneath.


