

Assemblages of Laughter and Sorrow

Women Workers and Allegorical Fragments

“I complain [about extra hours] but with just my salary and subsidies (less than 150 US dollars a month), my children would not be able to go to school. This is the reason I must cling to the company and work like a machine. I know my body won’t have the strength to work like this for long, but I must work when I still can. Really, I feel like I would die with extra work and die without it,” a single mother with two small children lamented to a journalist her predicament as a factory worker in Vietnam as the country continued its earnest incorporation into global production.¹ We can hear in her speech a particular mode of production that organized her future death beyond the shop floor. To this worker, the process turned her into a machine-like body while she could still work to make ends meet, and it would leave her dead at the end of its process of extraction. Similarly, representing workers at a 2016 forum debating the Ministry of Labor’s proposed higher retirement age in Vietnam, Lê Thị Nga, a worker from the Pou Yuan factory, voiced her concern: “I am a garment worker. Forty-five years old and my eyes are already blurry, my hands shake, and I cannot compete with younger workers. I can see nothing left that my body can yield in another five years, so the current retirement age of 55 already exceeds my strength, let alone raising it further.”² If the previous chapter deals with how the conversion of land into capital in global financialization turned the former inhabitants into the existential surplus or ghosts of themselves, we now turn to the ways in which the global economy, with its financialization through consumers’ debt and offshore subcontracted production, required a feminized surplus labor force, from whose bodies it extracted living time. What remained were parts of a body that aged at accelerated rates. These workers’ bodies became ruined and fragmented in the temporal-spatial organization of contemporary capitalism that oriented them

to a future elsewhere, rendering them unable to enter into humanist sovereignty in the political sphere of postrevolutionary Vietnam. As the land protesters grieved for what was lost in the chrono-economics and politics of speculative land conversion, these workers, the majority of whom were women, contested their devaluation as a surplus labor force through organized action, wagering the worth of their bodies and making them visible as the site of ruinous state and capitalist practices. If these acts were not enough to reverse capitalist harm, they nevertheless pointed to tactical assemblages in the face of capture by capitalist deployments of progress and worth in the humanist model of sovereignty, albeit in the late-socialist moment. These low-waged working conditions in Vietnam resembled those of Vietnamese refugees who entered the global racialized division of labor in the United States and elsewhere two decades earlier. Both of these groups were subjected to racial capitalist assignment of value in labor employment through geographical reorganization of production as well as migration. Neither Vietnamese workers nor refugees were afforded conditions to access humanist sovereignty in the political sphere. If Vietnamese workers' organizing met with repression by a Vietnamese late-socialist state actively seeking global investment and job creation, refugee workers encountered racist political institutions in Western countries of settlement that marginalized them. Modes of recognition attentive to what connected their conditions in racial capitalism could allow us to think relationally across national boundaries and political regimes that separate nationals from refugees.

The position Vietnamese women workers occupied was one produced by post-Fordist capitalism reorganized since the 1970s around an intensified gender and racial division of labor in temporal spatial zones based on progressive valuation of human worth. Populations and places deemed less advanced along the progressive historiographic color line were devalued and utilized as such to reduce labor costs and recuperate higher profits given the energy price hikes in the 1970s. Even while it looked like the production assembly line was brought to wherever labor was devalued by locality, race, and gender, the process also relied on migration, temporary or otherwise. Not only were factories built in countries deemed less advanced and powerful, hence pressed into offering tax and other regulatory concessions to global capital; they were also placed in proximity to urban centers, connecting them to other services, transport nodes, and cargo ports within those countries. As the countryside within these countries was relegated to a further historiographic lag and therefore of lower worth compared to their cities, companies would recruit workers from these rural zones. Most workers working on this global assembly line migrated at least temporarily from the countryside. Their precarity at work would be compounded by issues of alienation due to their class and devalued status as outsiders to the urban environment. In this way, these women workers were caught in a process that also played out in global metropolises with racialized populations who were there as refugees and immigrants.

Vietnamese refugees who settled in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s found work that was organized to take advantage of the precarity of those who came from “backward” places and were racialized with less worth. Whatever parts of post-Fordist production were not yet offshored, they employed refugees and immigrants along the global gender and racial division of labor. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, refugees worked in food processing and assembly line manufacturing. While many Vietnamese refugees who were men ended up in shipbuilding or electronic technician work, women often ended up in some kind of electronic assembly, or in garment sweatshops and piecework at home. Both my parents cycled through these kinds of low-waged jobs, with similar precarity in bodily damage, trading one part of their bodies for another. My mother’s fingers were shredded in glass lantern assembly work until she switched to soldering microchips onto circuit boards, breathing in toxic fumes. She suffered a heart attack shortly after she could no longer work these assembly lines. My father came home with hammered hands assembling skateboards to time quotas before he became a yet-to-be unionized electrician at the shipyard of San Pedro, where he collapsed with his first major stroke in the bilge of a ship with its high temperature and poor ventilation. Their work did not offer health insurance, and we could not access any kind of medical care for a decade before my parents received indigent care with their first heart attack and stroke. My parents and other refugees in the community often lamented their status as coolies, connecting their condition historically to the colonial use of low-waged Asian labor in Asia and the Americas. The French colonial government employed Vietnamese, Chinese, South Asian, and other Asian low-waged labor in French colonies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially on the rubber plantations of Cochinchina, now southern Vietnam.³ This would have been the first context in which Vietnamese refugees heard the word, with its implication of semienslaved labor. And of course, being in America, they could not miss the historical legacy of the recruitment of Asian surplus labor from the late nineteenth century. Vinh Nguyen has made this connection between refugee and coolie status.⁴ Growing up in the community, I heard this *cu li* lament as part of our refugee tongue, creolized in its multiple geographical applicability. In the context of North America, David Roh and others draw out the coolie robotic assemblage in a “techno-Orientalist discourse” that “constructs Asians as mere simulacra and maintains a prevailing sense of the inhumanity of Asian labor—the very antithesis of Western liberal humanism.”⁵ What connects the various coolie formations is of course this antithesis imagined within humanist horizons. Vietnamese workers and Vietnamese refugee workers cannot be reducible to one another in their modes of subjection and identification. Rather, they are connected to one another through disposable labor regimes that dehumanize them, aided by historically specific regimes of political governance.

In both of these contexts, people voiced bitterness and sorrow that prompted laughter in a reassemblage that allowed them knowledge and resilience. From

the damage and the time stolen from them, there was another story to be had. Some of the refugees I knew bought expensive shirts with their first paychecks to recover some self-worth. Many dedicated themselves to finding ingredients to innovate and share food dishes nourishing to their body and pleasing to their palate. My family went on picnics with other refugee families in local parks and on beaches where other immigrants also came to eat together and escape the tight, hot quarters that housed us. We tried to make lives as livable and rich as possible for ourselves under adverse conditions. And some refugees even tried to collectively ask their employers for better pay or working conditions, like the workers at the almond sorting and packing factory where my parents worked for a couple of years. Their ability to invent life in such regimes of devaluation allowed refugees to laugh about the sorrow of how they became coolies after liberating themselves from colonialism, and after settling in a country wrapped up in the rhetoric of prosperity and freedom. They laughed about the absurdity of the interdiction of the human behind their predicament because it allowed them access to a different sense of dignity in the ties and lives they forged with one another. Their precarity in racialized work in the late 1970s through the mid-1990s would be inherited by the women workers I address in this chapter from the late 1990s on, as globalization intensified and as Vietnam liberalized its Leninist command economy.

I look at some Vietnamese women workers' collective action, such as work slowdowns or stoppages in relation to their consumption, to think through how these women used their bodies as sites to counteract their surplusings.⁶ These strategies bring forth questions of class belonging or the (un)inhabitability of class identifiers that traditionally might have allowed workers to assert collective self-worth or mobilize via class solidarity familiar in socialist modes of mobilization. Yet, in late-socialist Vietnam, where the Communist Party worked hand in hand with global capital, women workers would encounter obstacles to the invocation of the symbolic power of the proletarian class. I look at aspects of the state's changing discourse on women in state-sponsored representation in public spaces such as state museum exhibits to explore how the state situated itself in relation to its interpellation of young women, most of whom came from the countryside, into workers for this global assembly line from the 1990s and beyond. If socialist historiography was about the deliverance of humanity through the advancement of the proletarian class, these women were not called upon to imagine themselves as proletarians at a time when the self-proclaimed socialist state served in the capacity of a neoliberal one in relation to global capital.

What then in terms of their own responses and our ability to understand their position, if they were not called into the time of the human? To contemplate these questions, I juxtapose what these workers do and say to a reading of a short story about young women who are about to join this disposable surplus labor force. Published in Vietnam in 1994, the short story "Tiệm May Sài Gòn" (The Saigon Tailor Shop) by Phạm Thị Hoài features the voice of an urban middle-class woman

narrator about a group of rural young women preparing to enter the global economy as workers and consumers only to end up with the dismembered corpse of one of them. Historically, print fiction in Vietnam since colonial times has remained a highly contested site as first colonial, then nationalist, and socialist authorities struggled with societal groups over symbolic representations.⁷ Juxtaposing the women workers' personal consumption and collective protest to this fictional story shows the capacities and limitations of both. The women's practices focus our attention on the body as the site of extraction and recuperation. The women's understanding and negotiation of their social location contrasts to the story's urban middle-class narrator's comedic maneuvering around expressions of dignity by working-class women in an adverse context. Yet, the story's sorrowful tone shows the limits of workers' recuperative efforts as they run up against the contradiction in Vietnam's temporal and spatial location within the global capitalist system. The urban middle-class location of the narrator's condescending voice provides comedy as it renders abject the social location of working-class women. Nevertheless, this abjection, enforced by the middle-class gaze and voice, allows the reader to be read into the matrices of subjectification for working-class women, which include the centering of middle-class consumption. Read in the context of Vietnam's location in the global economy, and juxtaposed to everyday responses by workers, the story's laughter and sorrow draw attention to the woman worker's disaggregated body, opening up new ways to think about the economic practices of our time.

Through the very body that is organized and disorganized in an economic intelligibility of profit, the worker's lament in the opening quote transmits to us the despair and outrage, and draws out empathy in us, momentarily restoring her to the position of speaker in a social web of beings. It is not my place to recuperate the humanity of workers to counteract the economic organization of their living and dying body. That is a strategy that these and other workers already took up themselves in the face of state-sponsored violence in a long history of workers' resistance against capitalist exploitation. Nor do I want to oppose the whole and living subject to the abject remainder of the fragmented and used-up body in its varying stages of progression towards death as the quoted comments suggest. What I want to think through is how strategies of humanist recuperation run up against the current dissolution of time's promise, and that there is a crisis of representation when it comes to reconciling the material destruction of workers with their imminent freedom in both socialist and neoliberal discourses. As such, I want to contemplate the relationality that emerges in assemblages connecting these women's fractured bodies and their acts to us when we read and listen. Together, we enter with them into contingent assemblages to be imagined in relation to the body-as-fragment in and beyond temporal-spatial states and capitalist intelligibilities of security and profit.

As the opening quotes indicate, the very materiality of the workers' bodies are made malleable, usable, and disaggregated as body parts are reassembled in

connection to machinery and shopfloor organization for specific tasks in industrial production. If eyesight goes because of poor lighting, then the lungs because of toxins and dust, then the back or the steadiness of the hands because of confined posture and repetitive motion, what remains from this depletion of the biological time of these surplus laborers is a remainder in the fragmented body. In other words, the Vietnamese woman worker undergoes a fragmentation of her body in capitalist production, organized through the redeployment of a fractured Enlightenment progressive historiography in spatial-temporal zones of lags, while losing her symbolic integrity in a crisis of representation as state socialist proletarian discourse (which was masculinist to begin with) accommodates global capital. Given this threefold fragmentation of humanist practice—bodily, temporal-spatially, and representationally—I find useful Walter Benjamin’s treatment of the fragment in his exploration of the Baroque *trauerspiel*, the sorrowful mourning play as allegory, itself “a fragment, a ruin.”⁸ It gives me a way to think about the ruined body not just as an abject site producing forensic knowledge, or even as merely posterior to the working body as its remainder, but also as fragment and ruin that can be reassembled beyond total capitalist and statist capture. Benjamin sees the Baroque mourning play as a response to a crisis of representation failing to reconcile the profane in the world of things to the Christian sacred order. The Baroque man’s sorrow in his inability to access symbolic unity between the material and its transcendence is anchored in the materiality of human remains, particularly the Baroque death’s head. Allegory foregoes such unity to embrace the fragment in the ruin that comes after man’s fall from grace. This crisis arising from the recognition that the Baroque man has been abandoned to his fate might have set the stage for its reassemblage in the rise of European Enlightenment humanism from the eighteenth century on.

Our return to the Baroque allegorical mode of expression may at first seem ahistorical. In what we call the Baroque, roughly from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century, Europe engaged in venture capitalism that fueled colonial expansion and plunder, the enslavement of Africans and other subject populations, and technological achievements accompanying fundamental political and religious conflicts that fomented a crisis in sovereignty and representation. From such European economic and military brutalization of the reachable world, alongside the political tumult and spiritual fragmentation, arose the familiar Enlightenment formulation of the human that transferred sovereignty from monarch to citizens as masters of their own fate. Yet, our time of the expired humanist promise may allow us to return to the troubled roots of modern sovereignty to sift through the ruins once more. Benjamin’s recovery of the Baroque allegorical is also a move out of time. Writing from a decade of the twentieth century in the fresh ruins of one world war as it rushed towards a capitalist collapse that required another world war for bailout, Benjamin saw in the Baroque the allegorical mode at the threshold of the modern humanism that led us to that moment. This move across

time allowed him to connect moments of ruin and see in the Baroque the utterly material fragments because their unity with their transcendence in the symbolic was no longer possible. I read Benjamin in a way that allows me to recognize elements of our ruined time in his reading of the Baroque. Benjamin's allegorical, as an untimely move, offers us a way to read practice and cultural work with the crisis of representation in our era's fragmentation of progressive historiographical time and the instrumental deployment of time's ruins by the developmentalist state or global capital. These workers become human fragments because of their work regime and because they can no longer enter into the unity of symbolic representation of the human, either as proletarian subjects or as neoliberal consumer-subjects.

The bodily remainder shows us the capitalist extraction of the worker's biological time to produce the speculable commodity and its future-time orientation at the expense of the present for many of us. Yet, just as importantly, the bodily remainder as fragment and ruin, with its insistence on the material broken off from symbolic unity of the redeemed human sovereign subject, begs interpretation and reinterpretation, waiting to enter into new assemblages. As socialist modes of subjectification go bankrupt, giving way to neoliberal ones that in our time bald-facedly celebrate the life-enriching and freedom-actualizing consumption in the progressive and conscience-bearing consumer subject, the ruined body as human fragment becomes perhaps one of the last sources for knowledge about ways of being that reject these matrices of humanist subjectification. Allegory has the potential for retelling another story from the moment of the symbolic exhaustion of the human. If allegory is speaking otherwise, then allegorical thinking about the ruined body as fragment in ruined time keeps open epistemological and ontological possibilities yet to be imagined. As Benjamin might say, the allegorical fragment leaps towards resurrection rather than redemption.⁹ If workers are refused entry into the time of the human in our current understanding of their condition, then we need to keep open possibilities in ways to know and to feel about how people act in rather crushing material conditions and the fragility of the human body.

SURPLUSING THE BODY, AND ITS REMAINDER

The 1990s marked Vietnam's first major push for industrialization and integration into the global capitalist economy, including industrial production and the rise of a consumers' market after the Vietnamese Communist Party decided to pursue this path under the terms of *Đổi Mới* or Renewal in December of 1986. The state, still governed by a communist party while becoming neoliberal in its governance, has justified its push for industrialization and modernization in slogans of *Công Nghiệp Hoá Hiện Đại Hoá Đất Nước* via integration into global capitalist production through narratives of progress, dovetailing its earlier calls for advancing to

industrial socialism. In an active Vietnamese labor force of 38 million in the 1990s, 36.4 percent work in industrial production, and women made up the majority of workers in light industry,¹⁰ where garment and electronic manufacturing predominated. Estimates in the 1990s put the rate of women workers at 80 percent in the textile garment industry, and at 75 percent in the Export Processing Zones.¹¹ By the 2010s, Vietnam became the second largest exporter of apparel and textile into the U.S. market, and the garment-textile sector became the largest source of private employment in Vietnam with more than 2 million workers.¹² And by 2017, the labor force in Vietnam has grown to 54 million, but the percentage of women working in textile, shoes, and garment remained high at 70 percent according to the Vietnamese Institute of Labor and Society,¹³ or even at 80 percent according to a Better Work report.¹⁴ Up until global capitalist incorporation, the Vietnamese socialist state valorized the proletarian class as the masculine bearer of history. Now that women made up the majority in global subcontracted production in Vietnam, how would they imagine themselves in the biological time-extracting conditions of their work and the life they could afford with their pay?

Marx observes that capitalist accumulation produces a “relatively redundant population of laborers, *i.e.* a population of greater extent than suffices for the average needs of the self-expansion of capital, and therefore a surplus-population.”¹⁵ The relative redundancy of this surplus labor force allows capital to use it for absorbing the shocks of market volatility by rendering it superfluous in times of crisis and employed in times of growth. One way to create such a surplus labor force is through land dispossession in the countryside. According to a 2013 Better Work report on Vietnam, roughly 84 percent of women workers and 82 percent of men workers came from rural areas.¹⁶ Beyond Marx’s description of capital’s need for a redundant workforce, the financialization of capitalism in our time expands its use of this surplus population. Neferti Tadiar notes the connection between the creation of a surplus labor force through land dispossession and contemporary finance capitalism as taking place not just in one economy but across the global North-South divide.¹⁷ Products made with cheap refugee, immigrant, and off-shored labor support consumers’ subject formation as well as credit in the global and national metropolises, feeding speculative finance capitalism. Grace Hong emphasizes “surplus labor as producing the very forms of racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference that capital requires but cannot entirely manage.”¹⁸

Indeed, by naming it *racial capitalism*, Cedric Robinson draws attention to how racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference has always played a role in how capitalism functioned as the latter made use of preexisting modes of differentiation.¹⁹ Following practices of the widespread importation of labor during the colonial period in what Lisa Lowe calls the “intimacies of four continents,” it has always been imperative that modern capital create labor reserves with its global reach. But if these surplus labor populations are to become superfluous when necessary, they must be differentiated and made vulnerable by their difference.

Roderick Ferguson points out that in “the United States, racial groups who have a long history of being excluded from the rights and privileges of citizenship (Africans, Asians, Native Americans, and Latinx, particularly) historically make up the surplus populations upon which U.S. capital has depended.”²⁰ Such difference may be produced by the state’s historical need for a “homogeneous citizenry,” thereby marginalizing nonconforming others.²¹ The state’s nationalist marginalization has usually been accompanied by a racist literature mirroring populist fear that a surplus population is exactly what capital historically needs. Eric Hayot notes the racist literature at the end of the nineteenth century that paints a picture of the Chinese coolie’s endurance for pain and repetitive tasks like an automaton while needing to “consume only the most meager food and lodging” in “an almost inhuman adaptation to contemporary forms of modern labor.”²² These surplus bodies were often differentiated from the white male working class as rice-eaters versus meat-eaters, to the point where calls for Chinese exclusions pitted “American manhood against coolieism.”²³ This racialized, gendered, and sexualized marginalization in the political realm enabled capitalist practices of employment.

In our time, David Harvey elaborates on the reigning mode of capitalist production since the 1970s as post-Fordism characterized by flexible accumulation, where capital takes advantage of differences it finds and reinforces or creates across the globe, including in the employment of labor.²⁴ Long Bui shows how global capital and rich nations envision a “roboticized, Asian future” based on racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference when, for instance, South Korea outsources to Filipina workers for their “telepresence” in English-teaching machines.²⁵ Those are but short hops from imaginings of Asian labor in the emasculated and automatized body of the coolie in the late nineteenth century, to refugee and immigrant low-waged bodies racialized as agreeable and disposable following the 1970s, to feminized Southeast Asian bodies gendered as docile and dexterous, needing little by way of biological requirements in our contemporary moment. This description of the automaton matches the feeling of becoming machine-like in the worker’s comment quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Not only does the surplus worker’s labor become alienated, but so does her entire body, as it enters into its life as a commodity in speculative calculation when industrial projects are financed. Imaginings of cheap labor feminized and racialized with expectations of dexterity and docility in the global South drove capitalist restructuring in the 1970s to offshore subcontracted work in the special industrial and economic zones like the nearly four hundred such zones currently in Vietnam.²⁶ This spatial differentiation operates by nationalized cultures within or across state-enforced borders, by state-created favorable taxes or other labor and environmental regimes to attract capital, and by the structure of power relations derived from both geopolitics and the global capitalist system with center-periphery or North-South inequalities.

The difference that feeds into flexible accumulation must be reinforced at every turn. If land dispossession allows for the creation of a surplus labor force just as

it did in Europe's early stages of industrialization, surplus workers from countries and their rural areas now imagined to be less developed and lagging in historiographic time become disposable, and these workers' shortened biological time becomes collateral to facilitate both investment in industrial projects and debt-based consumption accompanying finance capitalism. Angie Ngoc Tran found in Vietnam this maintenance of difference in low wages through piece rates, with long working hours during peak seasons that would allow the displacement of seasonal or other market contractions onto workers.²⁷ This new mode of accumulation involves counting on the state in these developing economies to repress dissent and keep workers from organizing. Until 2021, in Vietnam, all forms of workers' self-organizing beyond a state-run union were criminalized. Changes that went into effect in 2021 still restrict workers' ability to effectively organize.²⁸

The production and reproduction of difference involve relying on the state to temporally and spatially interpellate lower-class Vietnamese women from the supposedly backward countryside into workers on this future-oriented global assembly line. This trend continued to grow: the Vietnamese General Statistic Office estimates that the number of migrant workers from the rural areas working in various sectors in the cities could have been as high as five million in 2019, half of them women.²⁹ Young Vietnamese women found themselves valued as workers only in a global racialized and gendered division of labor where their bodies were devalued with cheap pay that could not sustain their basic needs, and yet enticed into desiring consumers' objects that they could not afford. Even if credit was yet to be extended to them in these earlier stages of their incorporation, their cheaply made products enabled the financialization of the consumer economy through consumer credit extended to their middle-class counterparts in their own country and beyond, in a web of markets connecting industrializing economies of the global South and postindustrial economies of the global North. Their racialized and gendered devaluation resulting in short working lives as disposable workers served contemporary capitalism by absorbing volatility in flexible accumulation and by facilitating its financialization through extended debt, which in turn becomes financial commodities for further speculation.

Clearly, the difference underwriting flexible extraction of value from a surplus population presents itself as not only spatial but also temporal in the financialization of capital. Forward-moving time, in terms of both future returns and historiographical progress, figures into the calculation and extraction of surplus value. As Tadiar puts it, "surplus populations are nothing but an entire global zone of disposable life-times for speculative maneuvers."³⁰ As future value fuels speculation on the yield calculated upon the extractable time out of the lives of workers, historiographical time allows zones of enduring temporal lag—that is, the "underdeveloped" or "emerging" economy, and within it, the even less developed countryside—to be created, differentiating them from the zones of consumption in the city or the global metropole. This temporal-spatial structure creates

zones of exception, as discussed in the previous chapter. Temporal-spatial zones constitute bodies in relation to each other as well as their intelligibilities. The body of the worker on the periphery, for example, would be constituted in relation to the middle-class body in the local urban centers as well as bodies of consumers in the metropolises.

Writing about the new slavery of our time, Kevin Bales notes the disposability of persons whose sexual or productive labor is coerced from them. Bales links such disposability to the shift in global just-in-time production from “ownership and fixed asset management” to control and appropriation for shorter-term labor needs.³¹ What Bales observes in the new slavery also applies to work regimes in flexible accumulation, rendering the worker, albeit in less immediately violent ways than the enslaved, “a consumable item, added to the production process when needed, but no longer carrying a high capital cost.”³² Henry Giroux connects disposability to neoliberal biopolitics, which withdraws life support from groups such as immigrants, the poor, and people of color who are deemed to be a hindrance to market freedoms and consumerism.³³ As such, modern slavery is imagined in terms of disposability, and Vietnamese women workers are treated as disposable in the quick depletion of their working and even biological time.

Such depletion happens because of both overwork in bad conditions and salaries that cannot cover basic reproductive costs like food and housing. The plight of workers in Vietnam well illustrates such disposable use of a surplus workforce. One study prepared for the World Bank by a team of investigators including two scholars at the Indian Institute of Management looks at conditions of workers in the late 1990s at one of the five Nike factories in Vietnam owned by Korean and Taiwanese subcontractors.³⁴ The study found that this factory’s labor pool depended on rural women migrants whose separation from their communities rendered them even more vulnerable than local residents. Workers were forced to work overtime every day for a salary of 40 US dollars a month, an amount “insufficient for survival,” and that “besides unhygienic working conditions” where they were exposed to “toxic solvent-based cleaners and glues,” workers were “subject to verbal and physical abuse by managers.”³⁵ The garment workers I met at the turn of the century raised similar concerns: dim lighting, which strained their eyesight; long hours in stationary positions, leading to back pains especially when the peak season workday could go from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.; lack of time for gynecological hygiene, particularly during menstruation, with limited breaks; and high density of dust particles from textiles, resulting in sinus infection, asthma, and bronchitis, among other ailments.³⁶ Government regulations were ill-enforced. One Labor Ministry study investigating 1,294 manufacturing plants registers heat, dust, and noise to be grave issues in garment-textile factories.³⁷ Workers inhaled dust, which could measure at fifty-two times the permitted standards.³⁸

Living conditions mirrored the disposability of workers at the factory. Many young women who came from the countryside to the city and its outskirts to

work in the garment factories lived in boarding rooms. The rooms I saw ranged from 3m × 3m, shared by two workers, to those that are 3m × 5m, shared by up to five or six workers. The quarters were cramped, and damp if there was a washing area in the room. One room I visited had a water pump inside. The noise was deafening and prevented conversation except during the intervals when the machine stopped. Many of these young women from the countryside could not prepare meals because they worked long hours, particularly during peak periods, and were too tired after work to make sure that they ate well. The workday sometimes did not allow enough time for lunch breaks, or the piecework system compelled workers to skip lunches and breaks to complete more items. Some workers said they went without food at times because it took too much time to go down to the cafeteria to eat, or they could not afford to eat regular meals at home.³⁹

These conditions have not much improved in the decades since the turn of this century. More recent Vietnamese news outlets continue to report on the shocking living conditions of workers that continued. One pregnant worker showed a reporter how she made do with a 7,000 VND meal, an amount that converted to about 30 US cents and bought her a bit of fried processed gluten and leftover rice.⁴⁰ While a manager claimed that workers' health is fully insured, and that medical expenses as well as missed wages are paid by the factory, workers told a different story about the healthcare facilities provided by employers.⁴¹ A shoe factory worker complained that health insurance required the worker to pay a percentage of her salary, and the quality of care was very poor with very long waits.⁴² In short, toxic working environments, long working hours, substandard living quarters, hunger, and ill-health plagued workers in the early stages of Vietnam's incorporation into global production in 1990s, and they continue today.⁴³

This is a form of necroeconomics, where life is extracted through low-waged time units. The piece-rate system in Vietnamese factories was calculated based on how many units the factory expected the worker to complete per hour. This rate of production per hour was then translated into the piece rate, so physical conditions that would interfere with work, as well as any seasonal or market downturns, would be borne by the worker, stabilizing speculation.⁴⁴ This system of extraction of life was backed by neoliberal governance on the part of the Vietnamese state.⁴⁵ These workers were worked to exhaustion, and replaced with new workers. The number of Vietnamese workers would drop sharply after thirty years of age, and to a mere 5 percent after age forty.⁴⁶ To refer to the exhaustion of her material body, Ms. Nga in her quoted statement uses the phrase *hết xí quách*, which literally translates to running out of even leftover parts of pigs or cows like bones, sinews, and fat used for soup base and eaten as the last edible bits from an animal. What she gestured to was her consumed body, on its way to becoming useless and replaced in her disability to capitalist production. What this process leaves behind is the remainder of the ruined body. As the site of capitalist organization of this extraction from the span of a worker's working life was the worker's body,

it became the site of workers' collective action taken in a changed field of symbolic representation of the proletarian class in a socialist sovereignty.

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND THE WAGERED BODY

Given Vietnam's history of official socialism, one might expect that workers could easily organize in the name of "the working class" or "the proletariat." Yet, labor activists in Vietnam as a matter of course found themselves subject to government harassment, police arrests, beatings by police and by civilians employed by the security police, imprisonment, or even disappearance. As Vietnam moved deeper into its role within the global capitalist system in the first decade of this century, well-known women labor activists like Lê thị Công Nhân and Đỗ Minh Hạnh repeatedly experienced beatings, arrests, and imprisonment with and without prison sentences at the hands of the state. Lê Trí Tuệ, one of the founders of the Independent Labor Union (Công Đoàn Độc Lập) that formed illegally in 2006, reported multiple beatings by both civilians hired by the security police and policemen in uniforms before he fled to Cambodia in 2007, applied for asylum, and promptly disappeared to this day despite efforts by his family to engage international assistance in finding him.⁴⁷ The situation compelled Human Rights Watch to investigate and issue a document in 2009 detailing "Vietnam's suppression of an independent workers' movement."⁴⁸ The document reported fresh crackdowns leading up to and following Vietnam's hosting of the 2006 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, when "dozens of activists—including eight independent trade union advocates—were sentenced to prison in 2006–7 on dubious national security charges, joining more than 350 persons imprisoned for political or religious activity in Vietnam since 2001."⁴⁹

The end of 2006 was Vietnam's formal debut as a player in the global economy. Its hosting of the APEC summit was quickly followed by its coveted admission into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in January 2007. The WTO grew out of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the American-founded international body to promote free trade at the foundation of the post-World War II liberal order. This was not the first crackdown on labor organizing outside of the state-sponsored union, but it was the biggest since Vietnam opened its economy to global capitalism. That both worker agitation and government crackdown coincided with Vietnam's accelerated integration into the global economy was significant. Human Rights Watch, among other sources, reported that in 2006 alone, 350,000 workers participated in 541 strikes deemed illegal because they were not authorized by the state-sponsored union.⁵⁰ The state under the Communist Party had to protect the latter's monopoly of rule written into the Vietnamese constitution, and any civil organization independent from the mass organs of the Communist Party posed a potential threat. Both the security of party rule and of capital investment dictated violent repression of workers' demands. Offering a

docile surplus labor force was what allowed Vietnam and its ruling Communist Party a place at the global table. Collective action short of forming independent unions directly in competition with the state union was not easy either, as the state feared these would gather into more organized movements.

This state vigilance in its fear of losing control bears out in the 2021 authorization for workers to form representative organizations that limited such activity to the confines of each company, preventing them from becoming either a real force for labor bargaining across an industry, potentially replacing the state general union or, worse, a social and political force in competition with party monopoly.⁵¹ Workers felt a sense of alienation from promises of a brighter future. A young woman from the countryside working the garment assembly line on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City complained that she did not see any changes in the years she had worked despite the state's proclaimed industrialization and modernization project. She explained that she would not be able to continue for long, as this work significantly affected her eyesight and the lint dust in the shop caused chronic inflammation of nasal passages. Yet, management and state health insurance refused to acknowledge that her condition was work-related.⁵²

Nor did the workers at this factory, most of whom were women, stop at identifying the conditions and the people responsible. Unable to get the state-sponsored union's help, dozens of workers organized a work stoppage to demand the "diligent pay" the company owed them. The state-sponsored union refused to pay for their lost income in the work stoppage. Company management threatened to fire strikers and brought in a contingent of armed security guards to intimidate them, taking down names of those who would not break ranks with fellow strikers. One worker explained the stakes involved: "I ask you, workers all have worries facing the line of security guards. We are renters who depend on our salary. We can't go without any part of it. We do not dare quit because we need our bowl of rice."⁵³ Enumerating the material requirements of living—rent, food—she showed how workers in effect wagered their bodies' subsistence to demand their due, in the face of physical intimidation. They put their bodily existence on the line.

In such acts, workers not only fostered collective knowledge about and collective action for their interests vis-à-vis owners and management, they also countered the state's detached and empty discourse about them by showing its historical promise of future deliverance to be bankrupt. They countered it with a performance, not of official Marxist-Leninist materialism, but of the materiality of bodily stakes, revealing their present embodiment of capitalist relations.

The temporal language of revolution calling the proletariat into their sovereign place in history now contained mere apparitions of itself as the material itinerary of its symbolic field became vacuous and ruined. By staking their bodies with material requirements in a work regime that treated these bodies as disposable, these women workers called out the state's bluff and the capitalist gambit. They had to fight from their worksite to reveal that the state's proletarian names for them no

longer cut the path across the interval between the material and its transcendence in the symbolic.

FROM PROLETARIAN VANGUARD TO GUARDIAN
OF THE FEMININE BODY

A 1931 Indochinese Communist Party document reminded cadres that the party did not belong to all “the wretched” or *cùng khổ*, but solely to the proletariat.⁵⁴ All through the nationalist mobilization for two wars, first against the French, and then against the Americans, the party had always maintained this proletarian identification. In practice, the exclusive class identification of proletariat was translated to a party membership based on “belief in the party’s ideology and obedience to the party’s regulations.”⁵⁵

True to its Leninist allegiance, the aggregate subject of proletarian sovereignty was the Communist Party, which promised collective redemption in a future time. Tố Hữu, the poet laureate of the Vietnamese revolution, imagined in 1941 the resolve arising out of the worker’s life: “The proletarian heart must carry the love of humanity / Our will, once forged forever advances!”⁵⁶ Yet, in our time, the poet’s “forever” had run out, and there was to be no going forth except in the fragmentation of progressive time into the promise of future dividend and consumers’ plenitude, both out of reach for the worker.⁵⁷ The redemptive time of the human might have lit the way in the expectant decades of the twentieth century, especially in the colony that was Vietnam. But the time after the revolution and liberation had become an “absolute end of a temporal journey.”⁵⁸

Integration into the global capitalist economy through the reforms of *Đổi Mới* meant drastic changes to the class system that existed in North Vietnam before the end of the war. There was a bourgeoisification of the new moneyed class that consisted of party-cadres-turned-capitalists, the so-called “red capitalists,” and a rising middle class in the new market economy. Social stratification became a hot topic among party theoreticians and social scientists by the turn of this century.⁵⁹ To retain its relevance and justify its continued monopoly of rule in Vietnam, the Communist Party parlayed images and narratives about valiant workers into a national goal of “Industrialization and Modernization of the Nation” proclaimed on billboards and mobilization posters dotting the nation’s landscape. The delivery of freedom was still always coming for workers in a promissory future. The state sponsored a union for all workers, the *Tổng Liên Đoàn Lao Động Việt Nam* or *Công Đoàn* for short. As Angie Trần has argued, the negotiations between this state general union and employers were complex and its efforts included its state-owned press coverage of working conditions, as well as lobbying for minimum wages and other labor laws.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, this *Công Đoàn* from the beginning of marketization mediated workers’ interest with little substantive input from workers, who were criminalized for self-organizing. And this union did so from the

location of a state whose policies became neoliberal to facilitate economic growth through the incorporation of Vietnam into the global economy. As mentioned, from 2021, employees are finally allowed to form self-funded representative organizations within each company, but not across companies, even within one manufacturing sector. These would not be trade unions. The only legal trade unions remain part of the state general union Công Đoàn.⁶¹ All other self-organizing activities on the part of workers remain criminalized as of this writing.

The speaking worker in Tố Hữu's poem is a man who resolves to trade the lives of his wives and children for those of ten thousand other women and children because he must "sweep aside petty loves / to embrace the great life."⁶² The proletarian subject seeking sovereign will in the revolution is decidedly a masculinist one whose women and children are exchangeable. As Vietnam opted for integration into the global capitalist economy, the party-state, that old vanguard of the masculine proletarian revolution, had to refashion itself the guardian of feminine virtues that bound women to global capitalism.

Catering to both the labor and consumption demands of the global economy, the state awkwardly incorporated new elements into how it imagined women at the intersection of transnational production and the commodity market. An example of this discourse was evident in the 2002 exhibits at the Women's Museum in Hanoi. In one exhibit, new color photos of women working in garment factories joined older black-and-white ones to establish historical continuity with the older discourse valorizing workers. One life-size installation showed a full mock-up of a woman engaged in home textile work for Nha Trang Textile and Garment Company, thus bridging the productive and reproductive realms, the public and the private, marking the feminine character of "Vietnamese women." The goods produced in bulk by the women workers were displayed as textile and garment products, filling orders for both domestic and global consumption. In this form of official representation, the state attempted to capture women in their role of workers for the global economy.

But such embodied representations of femininity and production work became inadequate as the market economy also needed to make consumers out of women who could afford such status. The state, in its clumsy attempt to fold within its own rhetoric feminine subjects with new desires produced by the commodity phantasmagoria of the market, settled on beauty pageants and fashion. In these exhibits, women were shown in pageants where they embodied the nation by wearing the proper attire like the *áo dài* and *áo bà ba*. These body markers of national culture now entered the market as fashion items. The less than subtle state representation of women in relation to work and to market goods marked a space of anxiety that the state had to guard in order to regulate Vietnamese femininity, which connected laboring to consuming selves. If the revolution promised a final resolution to the historical contradiction in capitalist relations, it was now content to replicate the contradiction in the subjection of women to productive and consuming

roles. It is to this place of contradiction that Phạm Thị Hoài's story speaks with laughter and sorrow.

THE COMEDY OF SORROW AND DISMEMBERMENT

"The Saigon Tailor Shop" positions the urban middle-class narrator and the working-class characters in relation to consumption. As rural women came into the outskirts of cities to work in the garment factories that treated their bodies as disposable, they came into a field of advertising that aimed to turn urban middle-class women into consumers in the creation of a local market. Working-class women attempted to recover the worth of their bodies in relation to surplus labor regimes by creating meanings for the products they could afford. I have made the argument elsewhere that garment workers in the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City consumed national and transnational body products—clothing, accessories, toiletries—in ways that showed they contested transnational work discipline enforced by factory management, as well as deploying notions of authenticity, nation, and foreignness to legitimize their position within a local context of social stratification.⁶³ Such complex negotiations exceeded what the late-socialist state could offer, shifting from proletarian sovereignty, imagined as working men owning the means of production, to its latter-day patriotic femininity. Phạm Thị Hoài's "The Saigon Tailor Shop" is based on the author's experience training at a sewing shop, and it is one of the few Vietnamese literary works in the global era that deal at length with women in garment work. Though written in an urban middle-class narrator's voice that tends towards the abject and misses women workers' resourceful negotiations in consumption as well as their collective action focusing attention on their body as the site of capitalist organization, the story speaks to this location of profound contradiction in which these women were caught.

"The Saigon Tailor shop isn't in Saigon, isn't in California," begins Phạm Thị Hoài's story.⁶⁴ Saigon is the old capital of the vanquished Republic of Vietnam, renamed Ho Chi Minh City by its northern conquerors. And California is home to the largest community of South Vietnamese refugees. Saigon, with its remittances from refugee relatives and residual business habits from before unification, was quick to revive to an economy no longer entirely dependent on allocation within the socialist state's central command economy that punished this city's inhabitants. And if refugees meant traitors to the Vietnamese state and uncivilized elements to be assimilated to the American one, their home in California still beckoned to many Vietnamese as a place of future promise.

At the start of Vietnam's global integration in the 1990s, both Saigon and California signified desirous market prosperity. The negative syntactical construction locates the shop in a geographical space of lack. The story's readers find out later that the shop is located in the current capital of Hanoi, where it gathers roughly twenty young women from the countryside to study under two

male “professors” how to cut and sew garments that will be sold under fake South Korean labels. Ms. Snow, a middle-aged woman, runs the shop. She is known to the young women as Mamma, like a madam managing and channeling the sexual energy of her charges in a new market economy. The narrator, a young Hanoi middle-class woman, comes upon the place in her search for an occupation in a rapidly changing Vietnam. The closest that this tailor shop comes to Saigon is its location next to a railroad crossing on the North-South Unification Express.

All day, the “girls” calculate, cut, sew, and shout out body parts of garments: collars, sleeves, armpits, breasts, buttocks, legs . . . Amidst the dismembered garment parts, the young women try to reassemble themselves into new incarnations as they undress and dress, open and close their thighs, modeling each other’s latest urban middle-class fashion imitations. The narrator becomes the model of choice among the twenty country girl imitators because she cuts an “urban figure,” the closest they could come to a Saigon appearance. The narrator takes pride in modeling an imagined middle-class fashionability, and in her ability to speak a “Vietnamese language that takes its time with punctuation marks,”⁶⁵ in contrast to Mamma. Mamma speaks Vietnamese in one endless run-on sentence. It is as if she is perpetually trying to catch up with the new speed of life in the new economy, or as if she is trying not to let loose her girls in the market through the gaps that might creep in between her words:

. . . no cleaning and leaving the iron plugged in it’s like you just shit right there leave it to this old bitch to clean it all up I get to carry this big stomach around to serve you young whores and what are you learning but to be sassy and you can’t sew in a straight line buttons hanging out all over the place like cunts button holes full of threads and watch it or I’ll chase all of you out of here this is a decent business people here are educated they know poetry properly this ain’t a whorehouse this ain’t the kind of whorehouse you can walk in and out anytime you like this is not a market this day and age who’s feeding who and if not me then let the dogs love you . . .⁶⁶

Mamma’s declaration that “this ain’t a whorehouse” or “a market” curiously echoes the tension in the state’s discourse as guardian of proper femininities at the juncture of global production and the commodity market. The state’s frequent antiprostitution campaigns were reminiscent of Mamma’s insistence exactly when Vietnam became a market as well as a supplier of industrial and sexual labor.⁶⁷ In the story, the women’s desires, expressed in their sexual exhibitionism through material things, are to be harnessed in their transformation into urban working women. Both the state and Mamma must discipline the young women precisely at the joining of the two demands the global economy makes on them: to be a feminized worker and a feminized consumer, corresponding to a laboring and a desiring body.

What constitutes whoring in Mamma’s guardian discourse is the open pursuit of goods in the face of the women’s lack of docility and dexterity in their work. This

puts them in a compromising position as though their genitals are hanging out. It is the inability to control excesses in their desires that marks the women as unseemly and earns them the connection to whorehouse and market. Such anxiety has precedents in the history of modern capitalism. Rita Felski reads in French novels of the late nineteenth century the same anxiety about young women from the countryside seduced by city goods to the point of “selling their bodies” to satisfy their newfound “appetites.”⁶⁸ Instead of revealing the market conditions that pressure young women to want things, Mamma’s speech calls them whores in order to discipline and channel their libidinal energy into docile and dexterous work.

Herbert Marcuse suggests that in a capitalist market economy, “merchandise which has to be bought and used is made into objects of the libido.”⁶⁹ The narrator’s sexualization of the young rural women in the sewing shop does not take the form of sexual liaisons with men, but of the desire for things that conjure up urban and middle-class fashionability as femininity. In this way, the middle-class narrator mirrors the libidinous workings of the market and displaces them onto the working-class women. The story dwells on lengthy descriptions of the young women’s endless appetite for urban clothing as they learn to sew the same items that would appeal to other young women like them who have come from the countryside to work in the city. It is a desire that escalates in its tenor. At first, the young women are taught how to make outfits consisting of light blue shirts and purple pants because Mamma thinks they would appeal to women from the countryside. The workers-in-training themselves soon become “intoxicated with pleated collars and puffed sleeves.”⁷⁰ Under the aesthetic tutelage of the male professor from the School for the Arts, “Orchid,” the most successful urban imitator in the place, forsakes country tastes. She makes and sports a smart outfit of pink jacket with white miniskirt. During one of Mamma’s anxious disciplinary run-on sentences, Orchid threatens to place herself in front of the train:

Orchid came down. She was wearing her favorite, the pink overcoat and white miniskirt. High heels. Lipstick. Hair like a waterfall. She dropped down step by step, stopping on each, her legs parting and closing, mesmerizing. Halting in front of Ms. Snow, she said, “Mamma, you don’t stop, I’m going to put my head in front of the train.”

Ms. Snow wanted to but couldn’t. When she had a crisis, her avalanches just wouldn’t stop. Orchid rushed out on the streets, crawled through the barriers, and placed herself across the tracks. When all heard the screeching breaks and ran out, it was too late. She was cut into three, the mesmerizing legs pointing toward the shop, her hair falling toward the flower shops. Her coat and her skirt were red. You could only see the pink and the white if you looked close enough.⁷¹

This outfit becomes the rage among Orchid’s peers even after they witness her body in it dismembered by the Saigon-bound train. Elizabeth Grosz suggests that erotic desires disaggregate the body-image, that lust is connected to the horror of the

dissolution of bodily organization.⁷² According to the narrator, the young women in the story rush to their disaggregation because of their consuming desires for these libidinal objects in the phantasmagoria of a commodity economy, which contrasts with what I found in the practices of women workers in the same time frame, as mentioned above.

The “Saigon Tailor Shop” narrator’s depiction of working-class women and their desires for material things departs from earlier depictions of rural women in Vietnamese fiction written by men. In the 1930 novel *Con Nhà Nghèo* (The Poor) by Hồ Biểu Chánh, Lựu, another rural woman, is forced into a sexual relationship and impregnated by the landlord’s son.⁷³ Another man from her own class, an honest farmhand, falls for her and offers to adopt the bastard son. Through Lựu’s active decision to marry the man from her class and transfer her son’s paternity to him, she undoes the landlord’s appropriation of her body and violation of her class. To wash off the moral taint, Lựu gives away the jewelry given to her by the landlord’s son during his seduction of her. The male authors of the older generation insisted on integrity based on patriarchal morality in the face of temptations and desires as their women characters are redeemed into the symbolic representation of their social location. In Phạm Thị Hoài’s story, where both the author and the narrator are women, the old patriarchal order in the countryside is not valorized as the origin that begs a return in its reorientation of proper desire. There is no promise that this would be the source of wholeness for the young women. Orchid’s father comes to the city looking in vain for her. He appears in the story as a pathetic figure reduced to tears by his failure and his loss. Nevertheless, the story still posits this origin as the place left behind when the women turn toward their own alienation in their inability to enter into the symbolic name of either workers or urban middle-class consumers. To counter this disaggregating effect in the new symbolic field, the young women in this story try to reconstitute themselves by assembling their objects of libido in the garment parts that double as surrogate body parts. The clothes as libidinal objects are accessible to these young women only through the armpits, breasts, buttocks, thighs, and shoulders of the garments that they must assemble into a bodily whole as if these were parts of an already dismembered body. These future workers assemble the parts to call forth the future as a vision of wholeness through either consumers’ fulfillment, or alternatively, the fulfillment of their own labor. Neither proves feasible in the larger context of low-paid and alienated work that awaits them.

Terry Eagleton identifies a sense of the ludicrous that draws comedy out of the mismatch between concept and its percept, as when readers of Schopenhauer perceive his lofty and relentlessly grim concepts of the world through his use of metaphors of lowly and vulgar body parts.⁷⁴ Through her urban middle-class narrator, the author also draws comedy out of the ludicrous as mismatch: the conduct unbecoming on the part of the young rural-women-turned-workers when they clothe themselves in things external and inappropriate to them, things that would

befit the narrator with her contrasting urban middle-class figure. This functions as a prohibition against the young rural women entering the symbolic order of neoliberal subjectivity via consumption. This prohibition against workers consists of their lack of material means to afford nice things as enforced by their wages and the market, as well as their lack of discerning knowledge and suitability to wear the nice things as policed by middle-class tastes. Feminist scholar Laura Kipnis has pointed out the homology in Bakhtin between “lower bodily stratum and the lower social classes.”⁷⁵ Phạm Thị Hoài’s use of unadorned or vulgar names as stand-ins for body parts draws out the discrepancy between the young women’s lowly position and the middle-class status they covet. The story draws its laughter from that sense of absurdity and incongruity. The depicted class-based mismatch heightens the hilarity of Mamma’s torrents of superfluous words, lowering the state’s high-minded revolutionary poetics of the past about the mission of the proletariat down to the guardian discourse of a madam. In the end, the story’s ludicrous comedy draws on the mismatch between the humanist promise of sovereignty for workers and regimes of economic interdiction.

Saigon, the former southern capital, haunts from within the existent glare of the triumphant renaming of it into Ho Chi Minh City. The narrator laments that she herself, by paying the dues for training at the sewing shop, is “purchasing a ticket on an express train ride into a future full of market-stall shirts and windbreakers marked with South Korean labels.”⁷⁶ Saigon in its association with capitalism beckons from the postsocialist future, but only as a ghost of itself in its vanquished past. To the rural women in the story, Saigon serves as a destination of escape and it marks the tailor shop as a “blackish engine crowded with dreams.”⁷⁷ For these northern women, Saigon cannot provide knowledge about their material conditions because it had been erased by the socialist North. The name Saigon becomes the stuff of dreams, immaterial, phantasmatic. As Saigon is relegated to the past of the ancien régime, it returns as an elsewhere in a future time of plenitude made for longing.

As the story performs middle-class policing of working-class consumption, it also highlights the women’s symbolic disaggregation as they are oriented towards a phantasmatic fulfillment. Such disaggregation results from the location that Vietnam occupies in the global economy. In its incorporation of racial and temporal-spatial differentiation for maximum profits, transnational capital treats Vietnam as a supplier of low-waged feminine labor and as an emerging market while holding up promises of developmentalist and humanist fulfillment. The state, responding to these simultaneous demands, no longer tries to produce women who can subsume themselves in relation to obsolete categories of masculinized proletarian subjects. Rather, it must now manage women as feminized libidinal subjects who at the same time must work to produce what the local or transnational market demands. The Saigon Tailor Shop is a site that mirrors the contradiction in Vietnam’s temporal-spatial location in the world.

The story suggests that the disaggregation happens through the place-in-time towards which the market directs the young women's desires. The train that dismembers Orchid runs on a track that should connect the material bodies to their symbolic representation by connecting their lives at the Hanoi shop to the Saigon of their aspiration. Instead, this path cuts right through Orchid's material body:

This was the Unification Train on an express run to Saigon. Still owing her tuition, Orchid could now leave the three pieces of her body in Hanoi and send her soul, without paying the fare, directly to Saigon. She could use her real name there. No way her father would find her there.⁷⁸

The narrator views Saigon as where the young women could recover their true proper names given to them by their fathers at home, rather than their fake urban names adopted when they came to Hanoi. In this phantasmatic Saigon, Orchid could finally escape her rural origin, presided over by the pathetic father. As it turns out, Orchid's articulation with her false Hanoi name leads to her disaggregation; but her articulation with her rural given name, "Tiny," could only happen in an immaterial place of their fantasy, always placed in an out-of-reach future time that admits not her body but her soul.

As the urban middle-class narrator attempts to find a gainful occupation for herself, she displaces her own temporal-spatial confusion in the global division of labor onto rural women destined for the global assembly line. As a young woman living in Vietnam, the narrator is also called upon to become both a worker and consumer. Yet, as a member of the Vietnamese urban middle-class, she places herself in the role of desirous model of urban femininity who understands fashion. By rendering the libidinous existence of the rural women ludicrous, the narrator enables herself to leave behind both the training shop and her tenuous boyfriend. By showing the dismemberment of the rural-turned-working-women, the narrator attempts to preserve her own integrity. This disturbingly comic portrayal of the young women's desires as ludicrous places middle-class and urban significations as *external* to working women, thus setting the latter up for certain failure to fit an intelligible collective name within a coherent symbolic field. At the same time, in showing the disaggregating effects on these women in the humanist symbolic field given the racialized and gendered temporal-spatial global division of labor down to the subnational level, the ludicrous element in the story prevents readers from believing that a middle-class consumer's future awaits the young women in the story. It thus questions the ways in which the promised national progress and capitalist prosperity function to organize life for those relegated to disposability.

Butler reworks Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection to draw attention to the "exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed," requiring "the production of a domain of object beings," those "not yet 'subjects'" in "unliveable and uninhabitable zones."⁷⁹ Reading the story's urban middle-class displacement of temporal-spatial contradiction onto rural women next to workers' consumption practices

or collective action, we could say workers resisted their assignment to these zones that surplus workers into abject beings. In juxtaposition, the actual workers' articulation of their physical condition and their responses in consumption practices or collective action hamper our reading of the ludicrous in the story. Nevertheless, the story's deployment of the dismembered corpse allows us to explore the potentials of the abject to threaten the boundaries of the subject and its foundational repressions in neoliberal sovereignty. The corpse, the exemplary abject, irrupts into and threatens the humanist symbolic order as it exhibits its irreducible materiality. The corpse and its severed or disintegrating parts can frighten in their utter refusal to console us with the web of meanings that constitutes our subjecthood. Orchid's dismembered corpse spooks Mamma to the point where she must recapture its site in rituals beyond socialist or neoliberal humanism. Mamma spends her days replenishing offerings of flowers and incense to Orchid's spirit on the track as the train crushes them daily. Perhaps Orchid's fate can be read as a double act, given the material stakes made apparent by the actual workers' collective action that wagered their bodies as discussed above. Orchid may have been dismembered by answering the callings emanating from the contradictions in the economy. But she also claims her compromised existence by wagering her body in the most dramatic way she can think of in order to stop Mamma's torrents of disciplinary speech covering up the material conditions in which she and other women are caught. Before Orchid's death, Mamma merely fulfilled the state's guardian function in relation to working-class femininity. After Orchid's death, Mamma fulfills another of the state union's functions: taking care of the funerals, the spiritual life of workers, still falling short of addressing the materiality of their life and death. But as a result of Orchid's wager, Mamma adopts the young woman posthumously as her own, acknowledging her accountability for both the young woman's life and the ultimate consequence in her death.

The workers' body-focused articulation and action allow us to infuse materialism into our reading of the story. The story prepares no feasible space for a common name that could belong to the women captured in global production and its social imaginings. The story's comedy merely enunciates the errant path that leads not the bodies to the name, not the material place of the young women's rural-urban trajectory to the symbolic proletarian sovereign of history, but to death by dismemberment on the railroad track. There is to be no reconciliation between the material precarity of the woman and the immaterial phantasmatic of the commodity. If the South lagged behind the North in the latter's Marxist historiographic chimera at the moment of unification, the North now lags behind the South in capitalistic dreaming at the postrevolutionary moment. The story reveals the impossibility of unification between North and South in their temporal mismatch, between the women and their calling, between their present and the promised future. If the political unification of North and South could only happen by bloody war, symbolic unity in historiography simply did not happen after war.

This comedy of the ludicrous appeared at the moment of a crisis of representation. And with Orchid's impending fate, the laughter takes us to sorrow.

Benjamin makes the distinction between the classical tragedy that contains a mythical heroic dimension and the Baroque *trauerspiel*, the sorrow play, that lives under the crushing weight of "the profane world of things."⁸⁰ And "comedy," writes Benjamin, "is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt."⁸¹ Phạm Thị Hoài's comedy draws out the ludicrous in the discrepancy between the market's twin expectations of feminized labor and feminized consumption, and between the state's proletarian pronouncements and its neoliberal management of such contradictions. Ultimately, the comedy leads us to sorrow following Orchid's death as the consequence of such contradictions, in this world of things.

Baroque sorrow acknowledges the separation of Man from God, and death as the material fate to be claimed by Man in the emblem of the Baroque death's head. This emblem holds "everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful."⁸² In its crisis and conflict, this period offers less redemptive hope than the "transitoriness" and "infinity" in the "realm of dead objects."⁸³ Sovereignty had collapsed under the weight of the arbitrariness of its own state of exception when God no longer gave it meaning. The Baroque drama revels in the sorrow that precedes the Enlightenment's herald of humanist time progressively unfolding as Man claims his destiny. In the Enlightenment, Man would reconstitute his sovereignty, popularized in republican forms of government. But now, in our time of Scott's "absolute ruin," we can revisit the "untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful," free of the anticipation of humanist progressive time and its telos of sovereignty. Ours, like the time of the Baroque, is one of brutal plunder, bloody conflict, exhausted hope, ravaged bodies and minds in the face of riches and technological achievements. In other words, a time of the fragment. If the Baroque man was but a fragment cleaved from God's creation and whose existence resided in the allegorical mode because symbolic unity with the divine order had collapsed, the Vietnamese woman worker shows us an existence in the fragment of that modern human if we can read allegorically. In different ways, many of us, refugees included, share with her this status of the human fragment in our ruined time populated by corpses in wars and used-up bodies in the speculative commodity economy.

ALLEGORY AND BODY ASSEMBLAGES

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin turns to the commodity and its production process in capitalism, which he thinks the Baroque allegory can, in an untimely fashion, address. If the commodity exchange since the end of the nineteenth century, now enmeshed in capital's further financialization, has created a phantasmagoria of meanings in a closed symbolic economy where everything can be redeemed

with money or credit, there is no need or possibility for symbolic unity between the material and its transcendence beyond debt. In this crisis of symbolic representation, allegory can be revisited as the cultural form that seeks neither a return to the religious symbolic unity of the age before the Baroque nor an Enlightenment humanist redemption after. The Baroque penchant for living with fragmentation offers us some potential at the destructive arrival of the commodity in the nineteenth century, capital's consumptive financialization in the twentieth, and the postliberatory moment of ruin in our twenty-first. Reiterating Marx's observation of the fragmentation resulting from the isolation of each detail in the production process, which in our post-Fordist time is strung out across vast geographical distances encoded in historiographical time lags, Benjamin sees the "Baroque procedure" in "the set of fragments" of the whole that the process of its "production has disintegrated."⁸⁴ The Baroque emblems, according to Benjamin, could be "conceived as half-finished products which, from the phases of the production process, have been converted into monuments to the process of destruction."⁸⁵

The current destructive capitalist practice of employing disposable labor is one that disintegrates not only the product during phases of industrial production across the globe, but also the human workers as they lose their eyesight to eye-strain, organ tissues to particle dust, nerves to toxins and repetitive motion, and strength to lack of life-sustaining food and rest. And with these, the destruction of the world to the point of extinction-level climatic catastrophe. For people living in the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam, who include the women workers addressed here, daily life already brings flooding due to rising sea level. Much of their world will be entirely under water within the next three decades.⁸⁶

Of modern Man, Benjamin writes, "the death's head of Baroque allegory is the half-finished product of the history of salvation, that process interrupted—so far as this is given him to realize—by Satan."⁸⁷ At this moment of the failure to enter into the whole human, by way of either recuperation in the neoliberal narrative of entrepreneurial and consumerist freedom or redemption through proletarian revolution against racial capitalism, workers, and those of us who share their condition of precarity, require a different frame than the humanist salvation that underwrites each and every one of the liberatory political ideologies put forth since the Enlightenment, including Marxism. Would it be possible for us in our time to, in a manner untimely and against Wynter's Man, treat bodily remainders as emblematic and allegorical, not of the human, but of parts and potentials thereof?

If the project is not to arrive at a redemptive integration because it is no longer, if it ever was, possible in a time bereft of possibility, how should we treat the fragments of the material in their allegorical potentiality? Forging a new critical position between the social constructivist insistence on a critical theory of race that does not get mired in the mud of essential ontology that insists on a natural body anterior to its social inscription, Rachel Lee proposes an exquisite corpse "straddling the humanist, organismal structure of bodies and a proposed 'future'

but really contemporary moment of distributed and symbiogenetic materiality where the enzymatic, cytoplasmic, metabolic, and regulatory activities of cross-species biologies coassemble with other chemical, informatics, and toxic force flows.⁸⁸ Lee's approach is that of the game of the exquisite corpse, where assemblage of material fragments engages a "transversal thinking across platforms," not to "expose a hidden truth but paradoxically to cultivate an openness to the wonders of the aleatory, the chance event, and the insight of the accidental networked through unacknowledged amphimixis."⁸⁹

Although much more exuberant in tone than what I can muster here, Lee's exquisite corpse points to how we may see the dismembered corpse as allegorical fragment of the human and not as symbol of a recuperable unified proletarian martyr or free producer and consumer in the impossible redemptive symbolic order of either socialism or liberalism. Margaret E. Owens suggests that Benjamin's "Baroque allegory works to fragment and to reify the human body, to render it a ruin," or "a collection of allegorical ruins," whose true meaning "is their thing-like status, their seemingly infinite exchangeability and the deferral of any redemptive unity."⁹⁰ Rather than the symbolic in a sovereignty of meanings, allegorical knowledge offers no assurance, political or epistemological. Such allegory of the unassembled fragments of the human awaiting momentary assemblages can gesture to a more hopeful Spivakian "politics of the open end,"⁹¹ or a less hopeful politics of ruin beyond the redemptive impulse in a time of afters that seem bereft of the future as salvation.

For refugees, attempts at recuperative unity of meaning usually took the form of a deferred humanity. The bodily and emotional damage from the low-waged work my parents' generation undertook usually got narrated as sacrifice for their children's future as full members of the nation and thereby the human race. This deferral put undue pressure on the younger generations, and at the same time as Espiritu points out, fed into the "good refugee narrative" and fueled model-minority racialization.⁹² Each generation was supposed to get us closer, pushing against the racist and classist interdictions to full humanity. Yet, young and old, current and former refugees continue to find they are barred from full sovereignty, if not outright legally then in actuality. The assaults on and killings of Asians in the United States during the pandemic shattered façades of humanist progress towards equality long time uncoming through the length of American history. Born American, my children underwent big and small demeaning experiences of racism much of their lives. Others less fortunate in education and employment opportunities because of ordinary and extraordinary institutional racism continue to suffer worse fates, including deportation.⁹³ Deportation is the ultimate expulsion from sovereignty, as deportees would effectively be stripped of rights that can only be protected by nation-states. If the nation-state is the standard bearer of modern popular sovereignty, deportation returns children of refugees to statelessness and the dangers from which they fled.

Alongside the hopes or despairing sorrows of waiting for deferred humanist sovereignty in their children, refugees engaged in other ways to live in dignity akin to those of the Vietnamese workers addressed here. Thanhha Lai's autobiographical verse novel recalls how her refugee mother comes home "with two fingers/wrapped in white," because "the electric machine/sews so fast."⁹⁴ But the girl narrator also humorously curses the English language that wounds her with its implied or explicit racism, defense against which her mother teaches her to chant "A Di Đà Phật," the Vietnamese name for Amita Buddha, and "Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát" for the bodhisattva of compassion, so that her "whispers will bloom" and "shelter" her "from words" she "need not hear."⁹⁵ The incantations under their breaths are "mother's response" to the bodily and psychic damage to their life in the land of refuge.⁹⁶ The mother's unmentioned daily bleeding fingers from garment work become the corporeal ruin that could enter into a momentary assemblage with spiritual breath blooming into shelter. The intimate speech of incantation and laughter on the *cu li* tongue gather refugees into a community of common experience even as it speaks or holds itself silent on the damage inflicted by racialized global capitalism. The *cu li* tongue knows well those interdictions to humanist sovereignty discursively, materially, and corporeally, but it inhabits the here and now of its moment. Beside the perilous deferral of humanity to the next generations subjected to further racist interdictions, other assemblages momentarily or imminently remain possible.

Likewise, by drawing attention to their depleted bodies in utterances and collective action, the workers in Vietnam were not clamoring to become either the valorized proletarian subject or the enticed consumerist one. Instead, they showed us the remainder of the necroeconomic process, whereby the fractured progressive temporality was deployed as developmentalist time lags to differentiate and render zones exceptional and its people surplus. They ran up against the impossibility of the symbolic order that granted no entrance, except to instrumentalize progressive time in the state's developmentalist narrative or the neoliberal promise of prosperity and freedom. Read allegorically, their practices gestured to the material fragments of their devalued and ruined bodies amongst the ruins of socialist historiography and the instrumentalization of a neoliberal one.

In the short story, the young women's journey of longing for what is rendered external to them takes them to a fate other than the symbolic unity of the material and its becoming, into the realm of the sorrowful ruins, not only in the form of the dismembered corpse at the end of the fictional story, but already before, in the state's narrated progressive time through industrialization and modernization, and in the use of their robbed biological time for capitalist returns on investment. While the workers show their assignment to zones of time lags but also affirmation of bodily worth in words and action, the fictional story, in its sorrow achieved through its comic verbosity, lays bare the temporal phantasm of

humanist progress, next to the corporeal horrors it produces. As such, the story points us to the fragment in and as allegory.

What use is it for us now to speak or think otherwise in the allegorical mode amongst these fragments of body and time? Our charge may not be the symbolic recuperation of the integrity of the human subject against its racialized and gendered dissolution in the production process or the commodity exchange. Our charge may be to hoard not whole humans but parts thereof in the small gestures of bodily worth left over from a bygone humanist era, or in the collective body wager at the gaming table seeking to insert a frayed materialist analysis. All these gestures and remainders are but the fragments allegorical to the condition of the ruined human subject in a historiographical time that cannot make us whole. If these workers could no longer embody the human universal as proletarians stripped of particulars,⁹⁷ perhaps they could now allegorically evoke the human in ruin when time promises not our salvation. Offering no epistemological guarantee, they show us not how to be human, but fragments thereof in possible assemblages of the now- and the yet-to-be-known.

Ours may be the time of the untimely, as Matthew Wilkens writes of the Baroque depository of the transitory and the incomplete: "These inexplicable narrative objects were then to be collected and stored as the raw material for a new schematization and as the basis of a new knowledge that would make sense of them, but which the age was not yet ready to produce."⁹⁸ That is the most I can imagine the future holds.