From Below with Love: Ethno-Proletarian Spaces and the Home/Work Binary in Siew Siang Tay’s Handpicked, Alice Pung’s Unpolished Gem and Lau Siew Mei’s The Dispeller of Worries

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Abstract: This article offers a deconstructive reading of three novels by Southeast Asian Australian diasporic women authors Siew Siang Tay, Alice Pung and Lau Siew Mei. Their texts challenge and ultimately cross over the line between home and work, private/reproductive and public/productive spheres, cultural/sexual oppression and economic exploitation from a decentered, postcolonial feminist perspective. Gayatri Spivak’s theoretical insights, Chandra Mohanty’s third world feminist anticapitalist critique and the work of Jacques Derrida on deconstruction will provide a framework for a study of the mail-order bride and outworking industries, as well as, more broadly, what will be defined as ethno-proletarian spaces. Tay’s novel Handpicked (2009) in her exploration of the mail-order bride business and the relationship between Jim and Laila forces us to see beyond the ‘third world difference’ while Pung’s Unpolished Gem (2006) and Lau Siew Mei’s The Dispeller of Worries (2009) interrogate the implications behind the changing nature of the ‘vanguard’ (traditionally white, male-dominated and factory-based) in the postfordist, ‘advanced’ economies of the West. In doing so, these authors counter a tendency in political economy (amongst Marxists in particular) to ignore these outer rings of the workforce, as well as scholars in Cultural Studies more concerned with gendered racialized agendas, suggesting that the aporetic interstices between postcolonial feminism and Marxism can be reinvested effectively.

We must keep trying to deconstruct the breach between home and work in the ideology of our global struggle to reach this female grounding (and crowning – gendering uses class alliances by showcasing the latter) layer that holds up contemporary global capital. (Spivak 1999, 390-1)

Introduction

The epigraph from Gayatri Spivak’s book A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (1999) points to new political alignments based on ‘transversality’, a term referring to the intricate ways in which race, gender and class-oriented alliances intersect in a multilinear world where allegiance to a particular identity marker is often provisional,
situational and thus ‘strategic’. Spivak’s work on Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction methodology, from which this article draws, therefore “insist[s] upon the need to examine the processes whereby we naturalize personal experience and desire into general truth” (Landry and MacLean 1996, 10; added emphasis). While the advent of postmodernism favors the emergence of ‘micro-narratives’ – postcolonial and feminist in particular – it has by the same token redefined the contours of emancipatory politics, through deconstructing the Marxist notion of totality.

Notwithstanding, central to the task of philosophy and literature alike has always been the location of a holistic subject (of history), hereby inspired by the layering of racialized gender and a grounding in class-based solidarity. Spivak’s insertion of the term ‘crowning’ in the epigraph further serves to emphasize the key role that the subaltern – i.e. “someone removed from all lines of class mobility” (2012, 430) – plays in the framing of economic power and privilege. As postcolonial feminist and Indian scholar Chandra Mohanty also put it, it is a way of a way of acknowledging how “it is not the center that determines the periphery, but the periphery that, in its boundedness, determines the center” (1991, 73-4).

Spivak’s work on subalternity has in particular focused on poor women from the rural South working in the informal or unorganized sector, which in a country like India accounts for the largest segment of the total active population (ninety-three per cent according to a 2007 report by the Indian Government). The zones of conflict springing from this article will be defined here as ethno-proletarian and include the mail-order/sex and textile/outworking industries. These locations may be rural-based,

Following Spivak’s injunction to breach the home/work dichotomy, these three Southeast Asian Australian women novelists interrogate and ultimately seek to deconstruct the line between productive/public and reproductive/private domains. Section one will look in Malaysian Australian author Siew Sang Tay’s *Handpicked* at the condition of ‘mail-order brides’, and their social positioning envisaged as a bridging gap between the domestic figure of the housewife and her more extreme public manifestation – the prostitute. More specifically, my interest will lie within the buffer zone of ‘posting’ between Laila and her Australian husband Jim, as the letters they send each other prior to meeting partake in the development of mutual misconceptions.

Home-based, unregulated and poorly paid, the outworking industry as it is depicted in Cambodian Australian author Alice Pung’s *Unpolished Gem* constitutes yet another breach between family and workplace. Singaporean Australian author Lau Siew Mei’s novel *The Dispeller of Worries* will allow us in turn to reflect upon the global restructuring of capital and the changing nature of the ‘vanguard’ in the new international division of labor. Mei presents the reader with a white male protagonist who has been *déclassé* through being pushed out of work. This permanent reserved pool of unwaged or low-paid labor further illustrates the need for ways of rethinking agency as “particular kinds of women – poor, Third and Two Third World, working
class, and immigrant/migrant women – are the preferred workers in these global, “flexible” temporary job markets” (Mohanty 2003, 525).

**Envois (‘Dis/patch’) and the ‘Mail-Order’ Bride in Tay’s *Handpicked***

While the term ‘mail-order’ bride brings to mind “images of department store catalogues” (Robinson 1996, 54) in which women pass for consumer goods, it also points to the role of communication in the relationship between clients, dating agencies and their female ‘products’. In Tay’s novel, these modes of communication involving e-mailing, texting, writing letters and other props become as many tricks of the eye for the constitution of avatars that draw from popular imagery and sweep over class differences to recode the ‘West-as-wealthy’ and the ‘Rest-as-wretched’. In Australia, the mail-order bride business was popularized after Lang Hancock’s marriage with a Filipino woman in 1991. The affair “drew on powerful elements of the discourse, the fact that he was spectacularly rich and that she was allegedly from a poor background and had once worked as his housekeeper” (Robinson 1996, 54-5).

In *Handpicked*, the apparent clear-cut demarcation between ‘First’ and ‘Third’ Worlds, Australia and Malaysia, Jim and his new wife Laila, is erased when the latter realizes how this man has lied to her in his letters and the photos sent her, and is as poor as she is by economic standards. When at the start of the novel, Laila reassures her father by telling him “[she] knows [Jim] well enough”, he ponders: “What? Through letters?” (3) Jim however isn’t so much described as an impostor as caught in the long chain of substitution established in the act of writing: “And, as if having a
life of its own, the pen would scratch away and out would pour words he hadn’t even planned – South Australian wine, the wombat, Australiana stuff she needed to see when she got here, shit like that.” (28) Jim also feels cheated when his brother Peter reminds him that someone such as Laila with a poor socio-economic background will have had higher expectations: “‘So, what you’re saying is that all she ever wanted from me was a *house*. Bloody hell. Is this some kind of a barter, or trade or what?’” (75)

As Laila finds herself at pains to trace back the source of Jim’s writing, she tries to reread his letters. After “she looks at the stack of letters, forty-three all up, including the cards and little notes that came with the gifts”, Laila comes to wonder, though, “what value [do] words have over actions” (167). Echoing Jacques Derrida’s simple reminder in his book *The Post Card* (1992), that “the letter can always (not) arrive at its destination”, Laila has to admit the fact that “things have derailed [and] something else has taken over, something out of her control” (19), while “the last twelve months of exchanging letters go up in smoke” (23). The misspellings of truth are here further complicated by the fact that Laila happens to be the sender, messenger as well as the very embodiment of the ‘mail order’. As David Wills wrote in his essay on Derrida’s “Envois”,

There is, however, a more direct application of the mail-order principle, of communication by contact like that inaugurated by Plato and Socrates, familiar, more or less, to us all. It occurs in cases of default, when one neglects to pay. It is the delivery of the summons wherein the bailiff is required to ensure that the document makes *simultaneous physical contact with his own person, and that of*
the person being convoked. If one accepts this cont(r)act, one is bound to defend one’s case in the presence of the plaintiff and before one’s peers. (1984, 30; added emphasis)

To the teleo-/theo-logical concept of ‘manifest destiny’, Derrida opposes in his work dissemination, theft, loss, discard, fragmentation, etc. Here is a case of the ‘letter-as-litter’, the process by which words have a tendency to drift off and disintegrate as they get circulated “through keeping, restitution, reproduction, the anticipatory expectation or apprehension that grasps or comprehends in advance” (Derrida 1992, 14). For Laila’s friend Marietta, the ‘derivative’ nature of delivery³ (in French, the verb dériver both means ‘to derive from’ and ‘to drift’) leads her in the hands of a scam agency in the Philippines “purported to assist Filipinos to migrate to Australia” (112). Marietta is then trafficked to a brothel located in Jogjakarta in Indonesia and her passport taken away before ending up in a sweatshop factory in the outskirts of Adelaide.

These are women who for various reasons (old age, a compromised past) resist the traditional circuits of heteronormative reproduction, henceforth constituting its restance (leftover). In Marietta’s case prostitution comes in the way, her aborted journey suggesting how “the growth in the number of Australian men marrying Asian women is connected to the growth of sex tourism in the region” (Robinson 1996, 55). Laila on the other hand rejected her parents’ arranged marriage with a village boy from Sarawak on the island of Borneo where she lived in a longhouse with other families in squalid conditions. In a symbolic gesture, Laila later in the novel buys haberdashery (leftover pieces of cloth), which she uses to cross-stitch “with frenzy”
(141) a patchwork miniature house. For Molly McDonald argues, the concept-metaphor of ‘suturing’ is “a way of talking about how it is that we are bound to the other, how we answer the ‘call of the other’” (2011, 54). Spivak also reminds how the act of suture or “couture carries the echo of the coupure or cut – the cut from the place or origin” (2012 172). Observing her friend’s work, Marietta thus coldly comments: “‘Last time I sewed was at the sweatshop…Didn’t need any creativity, just sweat’” (142).

Both women will eventually reach Renmark, a remote country town three hours away from Adelaide. There they are the only ‘Asians’ in a predominantly ‘white’ space, functioning as makeshift housewives, have been ‘handpicked’ with a view to repopulating this desolating setting à la Baghdad Café. Not incidentally, Laila’s new husband Jim works as a seasonal fruit picker, and in the following passage, one cannot help associating the fate of those surplus oranges with Laila’s own surrogate status:

‘What are they?’ Laila asked, pointed at the field.
‘Oranges. Dumped.
‘Dumped? But why?’
‘Too many. Can’t sell ‘em.’
‘What? And throw them away?’ Horror had spread over her face.
‘Can’t help that. Look, I ain’t part of that, babe. It’s all above me, decisions those higher-ups make. I’m just a picker.’ (222)
If Orientalist and patriarchal scripts having to do specifically with the mail-order bride industry inform from the start Jim’s and Laila’s relationship, it is also the fruit of a sexual division of labor between home and work, fitting Marxists’ belief that working class men do not *materially* benefit from women’s oppression ‘in the last instance’.  

While before meeting Jim, Laila had remained homebound “cleaning, ironing, weaving, chopping, cooking” (2), she fails to understand what working for a wage means and the difficulties for Jim to save up money as a seasonal worker: “[She] looked at him like he was worse than scum. Just because he was temporarily out of work.” (195) Jim’s precarious position in the workforce constantly belittles his masculinity, and an ad on TV evokes the double bind between cheap consumption and cheap labor in which the latter is caught up: “Two dollars, all this for two dollars each!” (156)

Conversely, Jim cannot comprehend the specificities of Laila’s oppression – in particular her feeling of being encaged in the caravan where they both live despite all the ‘free’ time. Jim both devalues her contribution in the home and refuses that she take on a job herself out of a sexist appreciation of a woman’s role:

‘You’ve never worked before. What makes you think you can hack this kind of work?’

‘I can. I know I can. At the longhouse, I worked everyday. I cleaned, cooked and washed clothes.’

‘That ain’t work, babe.’ (155)
Ultimately, frustration on both parts gets the upper hand, and through the exploration of Laila’s relationship with Sean in the second half of the novel, Tay suggests how it ultimately is the power/class structure of society that fuels patriarchy.

Sean is sales manager of an orange juice company and the owner of an expensive beach house in Adelaide, but Laila’s dreams of grandeur are dashed when he starts beating her up and treating her like a servant: “‘What the…!’ Shock creeps into his face too, followed by a frown. Then a look of disgust. ‘Stupid woman! What do you think you’re doing? You’ve wrecked my kitchen!’” (260) Laila’s personal story from one man to another concurs with the view that in the case of the mail-order bride business in particular, “unrealistic expectations on both sides often mean severe incompatibility at best, and outright abuse at worst” (Anderson 1993, 1410). More generally, though, these women “are at risk for abuse due not only to their status as women in a culture in which violence against women is relatively common, but also to their position as immigrants who marry citizens or legal permanent residents” (Anderson 1993, 1402).

The final part of the novel effectively deconstructs the ‘house/work’ binary through a ‘reversal’ process bringing Jim and Laila together again, albeit with a fresh outlook on their relationship. After Laila leaves him, Jim looses his job and is forced to accept menial, ‘feminized’ chores, such as cleaning someone else’s houseboat. As Jim complains in front of a friend: “‘All the bins need to be lined, including the crummy waste-paper baskets in the bedrooms. Like some bloody woman’” (318). Similarly, Laila’s forced journey into the workforce after running away from Sean and momentarily staying in a women’s shelter while getting back on her feet is an
eye-opener: “‘I used to think all women need a husband to look after them, they are helpless and, without a man, their life is useless.’” (330) Her new status as a single woman having to pay for her rent and daily expenses means she cannot depend any longer on a male-order bride ‘phallacy’, and the novel indeed does not say whether Laila’s return visit to Jim’s caravan is only temporary. Contrary to the bogus photo of a typical redbrick family house sent Laila at the start, the abodes successively mentioned – a longhouse, caravan, residential beach house, houseboat, shelter or flat – foreground the fundamental unhomeliness of cross-cultural encounters.

**Capitalism’s Hors d’Oeuvre: ‘Out/work’ in Pung’s Unpolished Gem and Mei’s The Dispeller of Worries**

Section two will pursue the home/work dialectic, by first looking at Alice Pung’s semi-autobiographical novel *Unpolished Gem*. Its title, as we learn, refers to a Cambodian proverb: “A girl is like white cotton – once dirtied, it can never be clean again. A boy is like a gem – the more you polish it, the brighter it shines.” (216) The title also alludes to Alice’s mother’s goldsmith craft in their family’s first home in Melbourne’s Vietnamese-Cambodian suburb of Footscray. With her mother found “always out there in the back shed working” (35), it befalls upon Alice to do part of the childrearing and housework on top of her studies: “His [God’s] plan for me was not to learn at all, but to be forever in a state of staying at home and looking after babies and cleaning up crap.” (89)

However, Alice’s biggest fear is that, like her mother, she will “have nothing to with [her] time than practice for an outworking career.” (93-4) With a sharp sense of humor, is how Alice thus describes her first ‘love’:
His name was Janome. He had a beautiful cream-coloured complexion, and all the pieces of my life began to fit together after I met him. He worked wonders with me. We functioned as a unit, so completely in synch with each other’s movements that it was magical. Sewing was essentially like driving the car. You pushed on the pedal, and guided by the light of the machine, you made the lines swerve and twist and turn towards some distant point far from home. (93)

In the West, textile outwork is a specifically ethno-proletarian (female) domain. In Australia, these women mainly come from China and Vietnam, or like Alice’s mother from Cambodia. Far from being small, their number exploded in the 1980s with the restructuration of the garment industry, when “the stability of the factory floor disappeared…with post-Fordism, international subcontracting, and the progressive feminization of labor” (Spivak 2012, 370).

In 2006, incidentally the year that Unpolished Gem was published, a study found outworkers “sew up to 90 percent of Australian Made clothes for major retailers, designers and for the firms that supply work wear and school uniforms”. It added that, “to fill their work orders, they often work up to 18 hours a day and 7 days a week” (Gardener 2006), sometimes for less than 5$/hr. While, according to Sally Weller, it is “now understood as an essential component of ‘creative’ advanced capitalist economies, the Dickensian conditions of the unregulated parts of the Outwork production sector epitomise the dark side of deregulation and the perils of a trade-exposed and market-led economy” (2007, 16). Marginalized, outworkers nonetheless
constitute a central cog in the new postfordist global economy in which subcontracting, outsourcing or downsizing – late capitalism’s *hors d’oeuvre* – is the norm rather than the exception.

Entitled ‘Hors d’Oeuvre’ and translated from French into ‘Outwork’, Derrida’s preface to *Dissemination* (1981) sets out to dismantle the arbitrary line between (a) work and that which exceeds it yet “must make the text intelligible”, so that “the outlines of the preface and of the “main” text are blurred” (30). *Hors d’oeuvre* has a double meaning: a meal starter or appetizer, it also stands for what partially resides outside a book and may disrupt its overall structure to become in turn *plat de résistance*. Derrida’s thesis, in line with his notion of ‘restance’ (the remainder, surplus, etc.), is that there is “nothing but extratext, in sum an “unceasing” preface” (32). As with letters or ‘post/cards’, prefaces are written in the mode of future anteriority. They spatially anticipate the main text yet temporally post-face it, are “both negated and internalized in the presentation of philosophy by itself” (9).

The indeterminate position of the preface further begs the question of “the status of the third term which cannot simply, as a text, be either inside philosophy or outside it, neither in the markings, nor in the marchings, nor in the margins, of the book” (13). Alice’s mother’s peripheral position in the workforce reflects the ambivalent nature of ‘out/work’, as Alice learns from an early age: “In the line that read “Mother’s Occupation”, my father filled in “House Duties”, since “Outworker” did not sound too good and might get the authorities coming over to check on us.” (67) This poorly regulated trade and largely migrant female enterprise in turn means Alice’s mother is particularly vulnerable to injury, illness and overtime, all of which will conspire to
push her out of work: “My mother had stopped working on the gold a few weeks ago. The chemicals were getting to her and making her cough.” (153)

When her husband decides to open a second electric appliance store, Alice’s mother’s customers take advantage of the situation to push prices down by pretexting that she now does not need the money or “need to work at all” (140), since “she should know that the greatest role of a woman is to take care of her kids” (35). Despite the harsh working conditions and the pressure from peers, work for Alice’s mother is, like for most of her female friends from Cambodia, all they have ever known, giving them relative freedom and a sense of purpose when compared to the immanence of home: “Used to working for others all their lives, they did not know how to be idle without guilt, and they could not stop working.” (147) Her difficult yet rewarding adjustment as a saleswoman at her husband’s store at the end of the novel forces us to recognize how “women are workers, mothers, or consumers in the global economy, but we are also all those things simultaneously” (Mohanty 2003, 527).

Beyond gendered racialized determinations, Unpolished Gem is above all a celebration of what Italian Marxist Antonio Negri calls the ‘multitude’, and of the concrete possibility that capitalism’s hors d’oeuvre may “no longer [be] merely an empty form, a vacant significance, the pure empiricity of the non-concept, but a completely other structure, a more powerful one, capable of accounting for effects of meaning, experience, concept, and reality” (Derrida 1981, 27). Hence, this is how Alice describes customers at her father’s store:
Here were the blind, the lame, the wordless, the mindless, the mute, all briefly passing in through the doors for their cameo appearances, and then leaving again. Here I was just nobody, really; nobody distinctive, nobody important. But here I was somebody loved for being precisely that. (207)

To conclude, a word will be said on the meaning of ‘love’. Running between the lines of the novel is Alice’s platonic relationship with a white Australian schoolmate, which led Wenche Ommundsen (2011) to suggest *Unpolished Gem* can be read as ‘Chick Lit’. It is perhaps true that Pung, with the sense of humor that characterizes her prose, has intended to parody the genre and its glamour, her family having had to flee from the horrors of the Khmer Rouges before their relocation to Australia. Pung also adds to the genre a specifically ethno-proletarian layer, describing Alice as “the darling exploited Proletarian Princess carrying the third world gene” (98). Indeed, Alice’s frequent ‘romantic’ suburban strolls with her lover serve as a pretext for a historical fresco of Footscray, which takes on allegorical dimensions to stand for a multicultural Australia: “This is the suburb of madcap Franco Cozzo and his polished furniture, the suburb that made Russel Crowe rich and famous for shaving his head and beating up ethnic minorities” (3).

Also immersed in ethno-proletarian space is Lau Siew Mei’s *The Dispeller of Worries*. Before he left his homeland, Rysiek was part of Solidarnoc (Solidarity), a proletarian syndicalist organization, which in 1981 helped spearhead the Polish Revolution. Poland shares with the Southeast Asian region and with Singapore where Mei was born multiple histories of colonization, having been the object of imperialism’s ‘Great Game’. After the secret police raids his neighbor’s apartment
and following the end of Martial Law in 1983, Rysiek will seek political asylum in Germany. His journey across borders sends him in exile to the margins of society, and from a state-owned newspaper editor with artistic leanings, he becomes a construction worker: “Such is the price of freedom. I have totally given up sketching. If ever the thought of it comes, whenever a pencil beckons, I thrust it out of my mind. There is no place for art in my new life.” (117)

Rysiek’s subsequent migration to Australia with his wife Beata will bring him to a run-down suburb on the outskirts of Brisbane: “All I manage is to put our names down for a Housing Commission Board Flat, while we rent a timber house along Lisburn Street in East Brisbane with other poor farts, immigrants like ourselves.” (124) The neighborhood where they live is a ‘no-man’s-land’ made of those who have been outworked by life – pensioners, single mothers, the sick and the unemployed. For Mei, ethno-proletarian consciousness is an exercise in the dematerialization of corporeality: “A feeling of invisibility has permeated me. It is only in Australia that I have experienced this odd sensation. Perhaps my unemployment has brought it out.” (136) Rysiek’s ‘ghostliness’ could explain Mei’s adoption of a distinctively magical-realist universe running parallel to her starkly realist prose and composed of “sprites, death-spells, shamans, and familiar spirits” (Chew 2009, 119).

While a review believed that the novel, “by suspending the laws of physics encourages us to contemplate suspending the law of capital” (Chew 2009, 119), descriptions of Rysiek’s neighborhood remain overwhelmingly dystopian in tone and come in sharp contrast to the elation breathing at times out of Pung’s Footscray, as in the following passage:
Outside, there is little relief, the timber houses on the street wedge in-between apartment blocks, while in front, the road occasionally thunders with heavy trucks. Across the street are a nursing home and more houses. I can feel the grime and smell the petrol. The neighbourhood smells. There is the smell of rubbish. The smell of rancid oil. The smell of burnt sausages. The smell of unwashed clothes and bodies. The smell of cigarettes. (125)

Rysiek makes for an emblematic anti-hero, seeking refuge in alcohol from his wife and from various employers who refuse to recognize his overseas qualifications. His hellish descent below is perceived as a just punishment for attempting to overthrow the system and rise above his own class. As he fails to find work, Rysiek must put up with the reproachful eyes of his wife, who deems him “not a man” (125) despite or rather because of his revolutionary zeal: “I think I know why you will not work, why you have no job…All the years of our history, of being oppressed, you have become a master of sabotage. You sabotage your bosses, the government, your wife, yourself” (151).

Born near the Gdansk shipyard where Solidonorc was formed, Rysiek has had to deal with precariousness for most of his life, the Polish Revolution taking place at a time of unprecedented economic crisis. Faced with a similar ordeal in Australia, Rysiek belongs to those the rightwing media has disparagingly come to dub ‘dole bludgers’ or ‘welfare dependents’. Within a crisis-ridden economy, this parasitic unwaged pool of labor, instead of being an epiphenomenon, has become “the
urphenomenon of the reserve: the abandoning of the self to…the security of the delegated or deferred decision.” (Derrida 1978, 238) As his wife accusingly points out to him: “You play with the system, always you play with the system, using it to your advantage, doing as little as possible. I know. I see it in many of the people here.” (151)

Rysiek’s symbolic castration later in the novel is brought upon by joblessness and by his wife’s decision to leave him to return to Europe: “Those ten minutes, I had spent attempting to convince my penis. In the end, I was let down.” (137) His love affair with Chui Hong, a crippled Chinese woman met in Brunei while on a temporary journalism contract then becomes a conduit through which Rysiek is able to channel his own fears of castration: “I thought of her legs, pathetic and helpless, which I had caressed so often. […] I shuddered at her deformity, her impotency, which I now recognised with some surprise as my own.” (170) Her deformity is all the more phantasmagorical since Mei, as with her previous novel, makes use of the technique of ‘doubling’. When Chui reappears in Rysiek’s life under another form, she denies being the person he met before and suggests they may be part of the same “spirit group”: “Some people say it’s a reincarnation of a group of souls. These souls keep coming back to play out different roles with each other.” (158)

Although ashamed of admitting it, the stunted, “helpless” (156) incarnation he first met in Brunei and made love to had “excited [him] then as no other woman would have been able to” (157). As said earlier, Chui’s first appearance in Rysiek’s life coincides with the collapse of his marriage and a sense of powerlessness at being homebound and jobless. It also follows Rysiek’s mentally deranged Australian
neighbor John’s aborted attempt to rape him while in his home. John’s “prime existence in living” (216), as for Rysiek, is to wait for the postman: “Between breakfast and supper, I have to fill in time. The odd thing about not working was that the more free time I had, the less time I actually had. I was occupied at all times: cleaning, scrubbing, cooking, fixing the car, shopping, exercising, sleeping.” (135)

Like Tay and Pung, Mei challenges here the home/work binary from a minority perspective, demanding instead that axes of solidarity be built “across the divisions of place, identity, class, work, belief, and so on.” (Mohanty 2003, 530) “In these very fragmented times”, as Mohanty added, “it is both very difficult to build these alliances and also never more important to do so.” (2003, 530).

Conclusion

Tay, Pung and Mei subvert in their fiction a string of dichotomies that still have wide currency in the sphere of political economy. These can be schematically useful provided they do not become frozen and turned into a dogma: hence, the line between subject and object, private and public, cultural/sexual oppression and economic exploitation, the ‘vanguard’ and its reserve composed of the unemployed, the youth and the pensioners, as well as the postcolonial underclass. These are sites of struggle – predominantly feminine and ‘ethnic’ – classical Marxist methodology has been reluctant to engage with for being outside of the sphere of direct production. As Spivak has suggested in her last book, Marx(ism) ought to be “supplemented” (2012, 182) with a transversal humanism from below attuned to, and starting from these marginal(ized) locales.

Interpreting these novels as *ethno*-proletarian also encourages us to move away
from autobiographical accounts of Asian diasporic female writing and from the
dominant thematic of immigration, identity and cultural (in)authenticity by means of
which the literature is routinely approached (Ommundsen 2011). It pushes us to
envisage these authors as individual artists in their own right before being the bearers
of a given culture or ethnic identity. While Pung’s novel is clearly the most
autobiographical of the three, its mundane depiction of life in Footscray takes on
allegorical proportions as we saw to speak for “humanity as a whole” (Mohanty 2003,
516). Mei on the other hand chooses to deal partly with a foreign culture (Poland), as
well as with magical, ‘imagined communities’, in Benedict Anderson’s understanding
of the phrase. Imagination also plays a central role in Tay’s novel through the
epistolary exchange taking place between Jim and Laila, suggesting that while old
categories cannot be gotten rid of so easily, they can at least become infused with
new, potentially revolutionary meaning.

1 In her last book, Spivak goes as far as to suggest that “because Marx did not theorize
the revolutionary subject, post-structuralism could arise” (2012, 29).
2 In theory, the vanguard is the most class-conscious, organized and better-positioned
layer amongst workers, although the concept has long been corrupted by Stalinist-
style Communism to instead mean the party that should lead the proletariat. In light of
this substitutionist tendency, Derrida in his work speaks of ‘la relève’, meaning both
‘lifting up’ and ‘the changing of the guard’.
3 The double meaning of déliverer (to deliver / to free) indeed infers how the letter’s
message, once it is let loose, is compromised. The meaning of envoi (parcel /
messenger) similarly shows the vicarious, impersonal nature of posting – a letter in
effect is never delivered directly.
4 Against economic reductionism and dogmatism, I direct the reader to Louis
Althusser’s For Marx for a dialectical articulation of the Marxist phrase ‘in the last
instance’, in which collective exploitation appears at once foundational and peripheral
in the framing of personal oppression.
5 In her previous novel Playing Madame Mao (2000), Mei had already adopted a
magical realist prose to critique contemporary Singapore’s authoritarianism and lack
of revolutionary ‘spirit’ – two themes also running through Rysiek’s character study.
Works Cited


Ommundsen, Wenche. 2001. “‘This Story does not Begin on a Boat’: What is Australian about Asian Australian Writing?” Continuum 25(4).


