

# GLOBAL IMAGINARIES AND GLOBAL CAPITAL: LAWRENCE CHUA'S *GOLD BY THE INCH* AND SPACES OF GLOBAL BELONGING

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## Abstract

*The unnamed narrator in Lawrence Chua's novel Gold by the Inch is multiply queered. He appears to the reader as a gay Thai/Malay migrant of Chinese descent living in the United States. As a traveler, his encounters with episodes of sexual desire lead him to different notions of belonging as his race, class, and sexuality travel with him, marking him as an outsider from one space to another. Likewise, every instance of mobility challenges his identity, allowing him to bear witness to unique forms of structural violence relative to whichever locality he happens to be in. In short, Chua's narrator is faced with oppressions based on radical assumptions by the outside world that utilize his race, gender, sexuality, and American cultural identity as indicators for an insurmountable cultural attitude.*

*In this paper I explore the promise of belonging as an ideological tool that valorizes participation within a global community in order to reinforce capitalist forms of labor and consumption. Using a Marxist framework, I seek to examine how socio-economic forces and global infrastructure induce the desire to belong to a global imaginary. I will also explore*

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*ideas of cultural difference through Balibar's notion of "neo-racism," and Žižek's conception of multiculturalism. Gold by the Inch illuminates how spaces of global capitalism manage and appropriate the desire to belong as a means of producing surplus labor populations and consumer subjects.*

## Introduction

THE STRAITS TIMES,  
SINGAPORE, April 28, 1990—  
Wijit Potha, a 28-year-old  
migrant worker from Thailand,  
was found dead this morning by  
fellow workers who shared his  
spare living quarters near a  
construction site at Tanjong  
Pagar. (Chua 1998: 3)

These opening lines of Laurence Chua's *Gold by the Inch* cite the daily broadsheet newspaper, *The Strait Times*. They provide evidence for an underclass of migrant workers, coded within a language of superstition and commerce. The article reveals that "18 Thais, nearly all of them construction workers with no previous symptoms of illness, have died in their sleep in Singapore" (Chua 1998: 3). These "nightmare deaths" are attributed to the belief in *Phi Krasue*, widow spirits who search for husbands to drag into the underworld. The Thai migrant workers react to these spirits by painting their fingernails red and disguising themselves as women in order to "dupe" the murderous widow ghosts. Unable to explain these deaths, *The Strait Times* defers to the supernatural, claiming that these spirits have followed the Thai workers from their villages. This narrative rewrites the migrant Thai laborer as culturally effeminate, supernatural and transsexual. As migrant workers, these

Thais are depicted not as enlightened, traveling subjects, but as foreign bodies who bring the supernatural and transsexual with them as smuggled ghosts.

This representation of the Thai migrant worker allows new ways of thinking about a global underclass defined through economic migrancy and an ethnicity that cannot be “overcome.” Published in 1998, Lawrence Chua’s novel *Gold by the Inch* follows a twenty-three year old gay Southeast Asian American unnamed narrator who travels to Southeast Asia after a failed love affair in New York City. Throwing himself into episodes of sexual desire, from gogo bars to brothels and massage parlors, the narrator seeks out romance, love, sex and belonging through monetary transactions, deluding himself that the affects he experiences are somehow outside a system of barter and exchange. The novel itself works episodically, and like a travel narrative it seems unsettled and wayward, tracking its narrator’s mobility from Paris to New York to Thailand to Penang, thrusting the reader back and forth in time as well as space, jumping from romance to romance, its unfocused form reflecting the unsettled identity of the narrator as each location he visits inspires a new performed identity. Holding the narrative together is the narrator’s main object of desire, Thong, a young Thai prostitute with “the kind of body you don’t see in porn videos...The kind of body that feels good in your hand” (Chua 1998: 21). As the narrator’s infatuation with Thong turns into a desire to know Thong’s thoughts and to be his equal as a fellow “Thai,” his desire to belong with Thong becomes obsessive. In the end, Thong makes it clear that he has been interested only in the narrator’s money. After the narrator catches Thong in bed with his “replacement,” a woman,

Thong only laughs at him and says “This is just a vacation for you, isn’t it?” (Chua 1998: 201). By refusing to accept the “Asian American” narrator as a fellow Thai, Thong casts him as another foreign sex-tourist, “just an American darker than the rest.” The “Asian Americanness” of the narrator is thus an irreversible mark, one that excludes him from Thai belonging and consigns him only to the consumable, smiling surface of the Thai locals.

While the narrator’s desire to belong primarily manifests itself through acts of prostitution, his estranged cousin, Martina, in the free trade zone of George Town in Penang, Malaysia, acts upon a desire to belong within a superficial, televised global imaginary. This desire is produced by the factory, which is marked as a distinct space where locals imagine an idealized global imaginary formed by the secular apparatus of the factory floor, but also coded as “spiritually” significant. As a member of the Chinese diaspora living in Malaysia, Martina idealizes a vision of “the global” that, unlike the nation, holds no normative racial, ethnic or sexual identity, but offers variegated ways of life within a capitalist hierarchy. Though Martina’s status and location differ greatly from the narrator, they both desire to belong to imagined communities that are structured by regimes of global capital. Chua’s narrator, a racialized U.S. citizen, seeks belonging in Southeast Asia by traveling from the United States and engaging in sex tourism as both commodity and consumer, while his cousin Martina, a third world worker dominated by multinational industry, seeks belonging in a globalized culture by working in the microchip factory that has come to Penang. For both of them, the longing to belong to a “local” identity or a

“global” identity is always motivated by an effort to escape their own abject status, and to pursue a spiritually significant, transcendent mode of belonging.

In Stephen Sohn’s essay on *Gold by the Inch*, “‘Valuing’ Transnational Queerness,” Sohn identifies the narrator’s desire to belong to Thong as a disguised attempt at claiming his own innocence, and implicitly, denying his own complicity as a sex tourist. That the narrator is himself of Southeast Asian descent adds to disguise his exploitative tactics by identifying with the locals. The narrator thus fluctuates between powerlessness and privilege through his multiple positions as a Thai and an Asian American. For Sohn, this fluctuation is brought to its logical extreme when the narrator criticizes the Thai people for their “complicity in the development of a late capitalist economy” while at the same time he participates in it as a sex tourist (Sohn 2006: 118). Likewise, the novel seems to end with no moral prescriptions, but only “offers a replicating narrative of the process of sexual exploitation and hedonism that overpowers the efficacy of political and historical knowledge” (Sohn 2006: 107). Sohn’s explanation for this moral ambiguity is that it reflects the narrator’s ambiguous relationship to power. In the United States, the narrator does not hold the power that would enable immediate ethical choices, but is always powerless due to his multiplicity of abjectness: he is queer, an immigrant, Asian, and lower-class. His sudden obtainment of social power due to his Americanness in Thailand and Malaysia puts the narrator in a sudden position of privilege that is never clearly visible, and he cannot see himself as complicit with oppressive forces even as he enacts dominance over others. The narrator thus possesses an “ambiguous

stance towards capital,” for “even as he criticizes Bangkok for being overly commercialized, he nonetheless engages in sex tourism” (Sohn 2006: 117). For Sohn, the narrator embodies the “fragmented subject” of a “queer Asian American male who has been objectified as a commodity in the United States” (Sohn 2006: 117), but who, upon traveling in Southeast Asia, also becomes “a figure for the Western bourgeoisie who participates in sex tourism in Bangkok.” The narrator thus occupies a constantly shifting, unstable identity that fluctuates between the “global” identity of the exploiter and tourist, and the “local” identity, objectified by the Western bourgeoisie.

Sohn’s reading of *Gold by the Inch* as a narrative tracking tensions of complicity allows us to rethink notions of identity as not only fragmented, but as shifting from one space to another. I intend to build on Sohn’s work by insisting that the novel itself does in fact attempt to settle the moral issues it brings to the foreground, not only by tracking these shifts in identity, but by working to stabilize unstable identities through the desire to belong to a global community, one defined not by the commodities of superficial Americana, of “bourgeoisie” and exploiter, but by its “abject” members who do not fit into stratified ethnic identities, and are thus more difficult to manage into the structure and organization of global capital. I will argue that the novel attempts to rethink belonging by producing a transnational community of abject individuals, who inhabit transcultural or “transitive” cultural forms. It does this first by acknowledging that this desire to belong to a global community is embedded in the production and consumption processes of global capitalism. For Chua’s characters who seek such belonging, this is due not

only to the hegemonic role of neo-liberal policies in the third world, but through the gaze of the Western foreigner, who assesses the value of locals and their place in the global hierarchy. Second, Chua's novel rethinks this desire to belong by focusing primarily on three distinct spaces: the factory, which inhabits the export-processing zones of the third world; the air-conditioned mall, which makes up third world metropolises; and the airport, which provides visual stimulus for disinterested global subjects. In Chua's novel, these three spaces function as subject-factories, producing particular global imaginaries with distinctly different defining features. It is these idealized spaces that in turn expose the limits of belonging within the infrastructure of global capital. Finally, Chua's novel raises the question whether forms of unstable identities, like the global spaces from which they manifest, can invoke feelings of a shared cultural belonging.

The term "global imaginary" I take to mean a collectivizing force where its members, as with Benedict Anderson's notion of an imagined community, "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communication" (Anderson 1991: 6). "Imaginary" first because its affect is to create new desires and produce "free" subjects, positing itself as the "common destination" for all people, and second, "imaginary" in the sense that the global imaginary relies not solely on print capital, literature and communications technology, but also on direct participation within the spaces of this imaginary—the factory, the mall, the airport—wherein individuals become subject to subtle affective regimes of intimacy and belonging.

By "global," I do not mean to identify a type of global culture spread through advertising and consumer products. Often such a conception of "global culture" is a euphemism for "Americanism," and is complicit in identifying American culture as "global" and thus neutral, or non-ideological. I take Alys Weinbaum and Brent Hayes Edwards seriously in their call "to articulate 'globality' as an expression of the dominant particular," to keep "track of the contradictions inherent in the notion of the 'global,'" and to develop "a method for understanding globalization as it impacts on 'culture'" (Weinbaum 2000: 263). I thus conceive of the "global" through forms of racial and class hierarchization that are posited as global, and to track the contradictions within these forms. To do this, I will also build on the work of social anthropologist Kaushik Sunder Rajan, who reconstitutes "the global" as

An American free market imaginary, one that has retained value systems historically but is itself at stake, emergent, and inflected with salvatory and messianic overtones. It is the articulation of particular imaginaries as global that makes American-style free market innovation an object of desire in places like India, but also makes it an ambivalent object of desire. (Rajan 2006: 232)

To Rajan, the "American free market imaginary" is not so much a cultural, homogenizing phenomenon of globalization, but an "ambivalent object of desire" that attracts third world subjects through the unreachable desire to fully belong within a global community by articulating "particular imaginaries as global." To Rajan the emergence of the global free

market is historically tied to an American system of values; it is therefore not to be perceived as apolitical and acultural. He uses the concept of the “American free market imaginary” to explain the influence of entrepreneurial and neo-liberal values on the Hyderabad region in India, and to point out a fashioning of the worker as “a mimetic American self-fashioning...in the image of the American Other that already exists” (Rajan 2006: 230). While Rajan wants to emphasize the American origins of the free market imaginary, I use the term “global imaginary” to mean an ambivalent object of desire that originates in Western and American values, but is “perceived” as an autonomous culture of the globe that cannot be isolated into North and South or core and periphery, but can be traced in terms of participation within certain spaces.

Finally, I find the term “global imaginary” useful in comparison to “globalization,” as it separates the effects of global capitalism from a western theory of production, finance and trade, focusing rather on subjective desires, affect, and the longing to belong, which arise alongside and are constitutive of global capitalism. To illustrate, in *Gold by the Inch*, the narrator, visiting his family in Georgetown, Penang, moves seamlessly from Chinese temples, where he mimics his aunt’s burning of joss sticks, to McDonald’s restaurants, where “full-grown men” dress in life-size costumes and “angry fluorescent lights illuminate scenes of immaculate debauchery” (Chua 1998: 63). For members of an American audience, it is tempting to read this juxtaposition of temple and fast-food as depicting the invasion of western values into the authentic and pre-modern habits of Malay culture. However, such a reading would miss out on the fact that the diasporic

Chinese, Tamils and Malays may already conceive of themselves as “global,” and to themselves may already be placed in a global imaginary within multicultural Malaysia. More importantly, the very rituals and traditions seen as “authentic” in the temple are themselves flexible and inclusive of the same company as the fast-food restaurant. As Aihwa Ong shows in *Flexible Citizenship*, products of globalization like Coke and McDonald’s restaurants “have had the effect of greatly increasing cultural diversity because of the ways in which they are interpreted and the way they acquire new meanings in local reception or because the proliferation of cultural difference is superbly consonant with marketing designs for profit making” (Ong 2006: 10). For Chua’s narrator, the juxtaposition of temple and fast-food is not to symbolize authenticity and Americanization, but to show how both the temple, where he mimics worship, and the fast-food restaurant, where he cannot help but criticize the locals, are both places that Malays participate in daily. Though he descends from a multicultural Malaysia, his family still treats him as an outsider, “as if I were some fucking tourist” (Chua 1998: 63).

To eat at McDonald’s for Chua’s narrator would not be to betray Malay culture, but to belong to it by participating in its everyday practice, where “whole families devour greasy hamburger patties, air-filled pockets of bread [and] french fries” (Chua 1998: 63). As an American, I might conceive of this particular fast-food chain as distinctly American, but to families who participate in its consumption, the scents, symbols and sounds of this chain may offer comfort and a sense of belonging when inhabiting its space. As Rajan says, “in spite of its [the American free market imaginary’s] absolute particularity, it

exists everywhere; the world is built in its image” (Rajan 2006: 286). As an imagined community built upon desires of foreign imports, the global imaginary is an autonomous social force represented through fast-food chains, factories, malls, airports and other multinational apparatuses. Yet it is not necessarily opposed to “the local,” and therefore must be radically distinguished from American and western culture. At the same time, the global imaginary cannot be understood as acultural and apolitical; rather, it is formed by participation within common rituals, myths and values that are simply not isolated within a “people,” a language or a region.

### **The factory**

Just into his intense relationship with Thong, the narrator leaves him temporarily for the island of Penang to visit his distant family, whom he can only remember through photos and postcards. It is in this episode that the reader meets Martina, the narrator’s cousin, who works for the multinational microchip factory located in Penang. She describes that she was “awed and intrigued by the equipment she had to use” in the factory, equipment such as a microscope, which “she had only seen scientists and professors use on television” (Chua 1998: 93). Martina’s awe for the machine quickly turns into the desire to “smash it”: “We work three shifts sometimes. By the time the midnight shift comes, we are tired. Still, we have to use that microscope. It feels like we’ve been tricked, you know. Sometimes we scratch words onto the microchips...Bad words” (Chua 1998: 93). Martina describes her petty resistance as a reaction to being manipulated—not so much by the management in her factory, but by her own desire to belong within the same

community as scientists and professors. Due to her exhausting work hours, she realizes that her belonging in such a sphere demands that she begin at the very bottom of a structural hierarchy, that her body be instrumentalized as a disposable woman, to be cast off once her labor power has been exhausted. The factory here thus produces the idea of a community constituted as global, and offers inclusion only through beginning on the bottom rung of a new hierarchy.

This “bottom rung” is defined not only by Martina’s position as an *ulu*, or village woman, but by her relation to both the modernity of the microscope and the supernatural forces that she brings along with her to the factory. As Aihwa Ong shows in her first book, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline*, “peasant adherence to [a] noncapitalist worldview has been used to advantage by capitalist enterprises both to enhance control and disguise commodity relations” (Ong 2006: 202). For Ong and Chua, multinational factories in Malaysia manipulate ethnic myths to sustain the worker’s foreignness and keep her docile, while still producing the desire to belong. Perhaps to provide an alternative to this seamless connection between the supernatural and the global, Chua repeats the journalistic form of the novel’s opening:

August 10, 1990—A Penang-based American microelectronics factory had to be shut down for the third day in a row today due to women claiming they were possessed by spirits. Some girls started sobbing and screaming hysterically, and when it seemed like it was spreading the other workers in the production line were immediately ushered

out...One morning one of the operators was found unconscious in the women's bathroom. When she came to, she told of how she had seen a demon with a three-foot tongue licking sanitary napkins in the bathroom. (Chua 1998: 97)

This passage portrays the official narrative of supernatural forces as something that is not only carried along with the worker, but is directly antagonistic to global capital. It refers to the spirits of the factory only as an explanation for the halting of production lines. The demon empties out the factory, and licks "sanitary napkins," items that allude to the medicinal, modern powers of the microscope. Martina admits to the narrator that "the factory is possessed" and describes the possession as a mental disease, a mythological remnant called *latah*, where any shock to a diseased subject can "bring on the affliction, in which subjects [are] unable to realize their own identity" (Chua 1998: 92). The workers are thus "shocked out" of an identity and put into a state of total mimicry, where "anyone bold enough to attract the attention of someone suffering from *latah* can make them do anything by simply feigning it" (Chua 1998: 92). Though the presence of *latah* may first appear detrimental to the production of the factory, Chua makes it clear that *latah* can easily be appropriated by the management as a disciplinary instrument, since it "can make [the workers] do anything by simply feigning it," rendering them "unable to realize their own identity." Through the reinforcement of this ethnic myth, female workers are put under the total control of the managers. *Latah* is thus redefined as a potential instrument of capitalist incorporation, and is presented here in an ambiguous relation to the forces of capital. As one of the "spirits of the original

inhabitants of the land," *latah* is rearticulated as an instance of the supernatural that distances the workers from the modern and scientific apparatus of the factory, while at the same time forces the worker to act mechanically through myths of possession (Chua 1998: 95). *Latah* thus solidifies a membership within the apparatus of the factory, that place of "dense, hard muscle, a solid chunk of meat with no suggestion of interior life." While the factory appears as sanitary and modern, *latah* codes the native as supernatural, and functions as the very means through which the worker is kept in her place, on the "bottom rung" (Chua 1998: 95).

The ambiguous position that *latah* holds can also be applied to the reactive violence of the Islamic community directly across from the factory, symbolized in a mosque that the narrator calls one of "the monuments to Malaysia's official culture" (Chua 1998: 96). This ambiguity is marked by differences in time, where the mosque's chants mark "the movement of time," but to the factory owners "the most productive time is a territory, a schedule, a mere dimension to portion and track" (Chua 1998: 96). The mosque here acts both as the "official culture" of Islamic Malay, where the factory is lifeless; and, as an official time keeper, its chants mark different phases in the workday, reminding Martina daily that her "time is now a splinter in the machinery of the nation" (Chua 1998: 96). These supernatural and religious forces of Malay culture hold an ambiguous relation to capital; they are directly opposed to global capital, while simultaneously easily incorporated into it.

The incorporation of ethnic myth into factories in export processing zones (EPZs) shows a level of tolerance and

flexibility on the factory floor. In the factory, the “local culture” is not left behind in the *kampungs* of Malaysia, but is brought with the worker into spaces of global capital where they participate, rather than assimilate. The incentives to take part in the multinational factory should not be reduced to merely the wages, but should include the benefits of belonging to an imagined global community, one that is based on a liberalist notion of freedom and “local” tradition. For Malaysian female workers, often the ideological incentives to participate in such work happen to derive from Western feminism, where “state development policies have filled industrial zones, campuses and cities with young Muslim women drawn mainly from villages dominated by Islamic clerics and teachers” (Ong 2006: 34). Aihwa Ong sees the employment of women in these regions as a “challenge to male authority and economic dominance,” as a form of erotic aggression that undermines morality (Ong 2006: 34, 40). In *Gold by the Inch*, these Islamic communities produce a binary opposition between themselves and the factory by ostracizing women workers, claiming that they “try to copy men” and that “they forget their sex” (Chua 1998: 92). Yet this tactic, when seen by workers through the liberal feminism of a more global culture, is seen not as an Islamic article of faith, but as an example of pre-modern women’s oppression within a patriarchal society. In contrast, the factory offers the promise of belonging to a global imagined community, where women can obtain agency through “free labor.” Notions of female liberation and development within a global culture have been popularized by economists like Jeffrey Sachs, who sees development as “raising the consciousness and power of women in a [third world] society that was

long brazenly biased against women’s chances in life” (Sachs 2005: 13). Thus the moral indictments by Muslim clerics are seen here as alienating to the working women, who may find a global imaginary as the only viable alternative to a pre-modern, patriarchal society.

As a symbol of belonging to a global imaginary, the factory serves to keep the working subject progressing ever closer to the ideal of full belonging, an ideal made unreachable by numerous forces of structural violence and new collectivities that limit the worker’s agency within EPZs. I mean to use Paul Farmer’s definition of “structural violence” as “a broad rubric that includes a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender equality, and the more spectacular forms of violence” (Farmer 2003: 8). I mean the term here as the structural preconditions for exploitative violence, preconditions such as poverty and patriarchy which enable the global imaginary to be seen as a utopic, multicultural alternative. Often it is multinational corporations themselves who reinforce or create these conditions. According to Ong, corporations operating within EPZs are given semi-autonomous reign over industrial parks and other areas of high foreign direct investment. With state support, these companies aim at areas with a surplus population of rural poor, seeking workers who can supply extremely low labor costs. Ong points out that “in the initial decades of export-industrialization, EPZs were given a free hand to exploit abundant low-wage workers, most of whom were female” (Ong 2006: 103). In rural EPZs, young females living in villages very often have few years between childhood and child-bearing in which to work, and rural

factories often offer exhausting work with a one to two year turn-over rate.<sup>2</sup> By supplanting themselves in zones of rural poor, multinationals not only utilize already existing structural violence to produce a population of low-wage factory laborers, but have a heavy hand in intensifying these regimes within their operative spaces.

As Chua's novel shows, the working subject in the Fordist factories of Penang is encouraged to belong to a global imaginary insofar as that desire remains suspended by her alignment with the supernatural. The factory of Penang then not only produces microchips, but productive subjects, produced through the desire to belong. To Martina, the motivation for factory labor is not only in its economic benefit, but also in the promise of belonging within a global community, as Chua's narrator sarcastically tells us:

Only by participating in the inhumanity of the workday will the native earn her humanity. Labor allows her to know herself, to know subjugation and alienation. Without labor, the native is just an unprofitable element in the fabric of the empire, incapable of developing the colonies' resources. (Chua 1998: 97)

The desire for a global imaginary thus begins by becoming a "free worker"—a

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<sup>2</sup> According to Wright, "the desire for a two year turn-over rate reveals the belief that unskilled workers operate on a trajectory of diminishing returns. At some point (in this case, within two years), the replacement of these workers is regarded as more valuable to the company than their continued employment" (2006: 28).

valued subject who participates within the global imaginary through her very own exploitation. As Marx says in *Capital*, the free worker becomes free in a double-sense, "that as a free individual he can dispose of his labor-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale" (Marx 1998: 273). This supposedly "free worker" becomes unfree in her total dependence upon wage-labor.<sup>3</sup> Martina's humanity, as a free-worker belonging in a global community of free-workers, is reinforced by wage-labor, rather than contradicted by it. She opines to the narrator, "I don't love this job, but that paycheck makes me feel more human," and, after a sigh, adds "but what is human these days, anyway?" (Chua 1998: 98). For Martina, to belong to a global community of free workers, she must identify her own body as a resource for another. It is this very identification as a foreign worker, as a human recognized by other humans within a global imaginary, that is the *sine qua non* for her exploitation.

If the creation of new desires—to belong within a global imaginary—manifests by participating in global production, then *latah* and the Islamic community have the effect of marking the worker as both supernatural Other and as one who belongs to the global imaginary, but only as pure mechanism. As Marx says in *The German Ideology*, "the ruling class" is compelled "to present its interest as the common interest of all the members of society...it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only

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<sup>3</sup> For Marx, "in the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the 'natural laws of production', i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them" (Marx 1998: 899).

rational, valid ones” (Marx 1998: 68). Martina’s encounter with the microscope can be seen as a face-to-face encounter with a modern analytical device that is universally valid to the global community. The answer to her question then, “what is human?” is answered implicitly by the device and the space of the factory, an apparatus where the scents, images, and embodiment of the self as a free worker, contribute to one’s “form of universality.” In Chua’s novel, ethnic Malays are far from being represented as “pre-capitalist” or “not yet” capitalists, resigned to the waiting room of history; rather they are seen as belonging to a global imaginary within varying degrees. The space of the factory is simply the “bottom rung” of a ladder of belonging—a narrative towards an ideal, global imaginary.

### **The shopping mall**

Neo-liberal economists like Jeffrey Sachs use the metaphor of the ladder of development to legitimize the financial and productive development of dependent regions and states. To Sachs, it is the duty of the West to “help [the underdeveloped] onto the ladder of development, at least to gain a foothold on the bottom rung, from which they can then proceed to climb on their own” (Sachs 2005: 15). In order to read neo-liberal discourse against itself, I will argue that this concept of a developmental ladder must be seen as inseparable from a “cultural ladder” of belonging, where identifying as a wage laborer in the factory can be called the first “rung” of full belonging. The second “rung” I will name as identifying as a consumer of products produced by the wage labor of another. In *Gold by the Inch*, Martina is able to belong to the global imaginary through participating in rudimentary, unskilled tasks that require

constant repetition in Fordist-style factories. But for the Malays’ participating in the McDonald’s restaurant, global belonging is produced through the consumption of manufactured products. Though the worker and consumer in these examples might be separated by class, race and region, to thinkers such as Grace Hong, it is the combination of being both worker and consumer that produces a greater sense of connectivity to a global imagined community. As Hong puts it, the modes of production in the third world factory “privilege[d] a particular kind of worker: the producer as consumer” (Hong 2006: 73). The consumption of foreign imports thus distracts the worker from the monotony of Fordist factories. The multinational mall thus produces a worker that is, on the one hand, abstracted through participating in export manufacturing, and on the other, self-differentiated through participating in import consumption. Hong goes on to say that consumerism becomes “a form of agency, albeit a limited one, in an area when Taylorized modes of industrial production were systematically snipping agency in the workplace by deskilling labor” (Hong 2006: 89). Where the worker is devoid of self and identity in the workplace, as a consumer she acts as a self-defining agent, one thrust into “an unquenchable commerce” (Hong 2006: 89), belonging to a global community of consumers of shared fashion, shared notions of aesthetic beauty, and shared fetishization of imports. By participating in a global market, the worker is given the “privilege” of progressing further into a global imaginary.

In Chua’s third world metropolis, the mall is a haven from the public space of the urban streets, the detritus and human poverty, the mercantile thoroughfares. As Chua states in his preface to the anthology

*Muæ 2: Collapsing New Buildings*, this consumer-oriented public space makes it “impossible to walk anywhere in the city without a commercial transaction” (Chua 1997: 8). The middle class refuge from the disparate poor is sanctioned within the air-conditioned walls of the shopping mall, where returning to the streets of a public space that is constantly under erasure is only meant to intensify the tourist gaze, as a way to “ogle like tourists at the dispossessed, then take their asses back to the cushions of safety...in the gleaming white halls of the shopping mall” (Chua 1997: 8). In *Gold by the Inch*, this participation is delineated by the narrator’s simultaneous participation in, and critical analysis of, the third world shopping mall. It is in the mall that the subject attains agency in a ritual of consumption and participates in the demand for further imports. While the global imaginary presents itself to the third world laborer in the form of the factory and microscope, to the consumer-subject, it arrives in the form of consumer culture. As Chua’s narrator states upon entering a mall in Thailand:

Now I know what development means: air-conditioning. With air-conditioning, we can have civilization, which exists only in temperate climates...The only safety is in the private ammonia-scented corridors of the mall like this one. Here we can surrender lives that are too complex to be lived any longer. Here we can find happiness and security under the oppression of the senses. (Chua 1998: 35)

Chua juxtaposes the security of the mall with a panhandling “little girl” who circles its entrance. When he sees her, the narrator states that he feels no pity for her, and that

“the poverty that spawned her seems even more remote than she is. We are growing, far above her, tiny, vanishing figure. Soon she would mean nothing. We were growing so fast and we needed a respite from people like her, from the fried locusts and crumbling sidewalks outside the mall” (Chua 1998: 35). This direct juxtaposition of the “little girl” with the security of the shopping mall implies a hierarchy of “cultural development,” in which the mall functions as a symbol of achievement that enables the narrator to “rise above [the girl]’s tiny, vanishing figure” (Chua 1998: 35).

This ascension, however, is not to be understood as simply an ascension to the West, for the narrator’s purpose in the mall is to access an authentic Thai identity. His ‘gateway’ to this identity is his lover Thong, whom he takes to the mall to buy “a gold ring,” and whom, on the escalators, the narrator idealizes as a “young and perfect” local that can speak Thai “like he owns it” (Chua 1998: 36). This idealization of Thong as an authentic Thai is not simply to mark Thong’s body as a highly valued consumable object, but to mark him as an ego-ideal that the narrator seeks to attain. As the narrator says, “he’s fluent in a language I learned only as chastisement or in the breathing of confidences. But there is always his voice, stripped and serious, or teasing, more than anything we ever say. I love the way he talks so much I often forget what he’s saying” (Chua 1998: 36). Only after first describing his own linguistic lack, which keeps him from belonging fully as a Thai, is the narrator able to see Thong, who “owns the language,” as not just a consumable object, but as the embodiment of the narrator’s own ideal of full belonging. The exchange-relationship that provides the sub-text for all of his

activities with Thong belies the narrator's belonging to him, and it is in the mall where he first directly asks Thong: "Why are you doing this? Is it the money?" and hears the ambiguous, never quite satisfactory answer: "No, it's not the money. But yeah, it's that too" (Chua 1998: 36).

Ironically, it is the golden ring, purchased in the shopping mall, that the narrator later finds on Thong's bed, next to the narrator's "replacement": a woman "crumpled" beside Thong (Chua 1998: 198). Thong's ability to keep the narrator's desire always on the cusp is symbolized in the golden ring—an item that time and again reminds the narrator that his relationship with Thong is always one of exchange. The same can be said for the way Chua depicts the mall itself, as a place where "we can have civilization," but only after passing through the urban poor and young panhandlers. Consumerism is thus put into a narrative that, like Thong, keeps its participants always on the cusp of full belonging, of climbing ever higher upon a cultural ladder. While Southeast Asian marketplaces have narrow mazes, inescapable heat, screaming market dwellers, noisome smells and items that must be bartered for again and again, the shopping mall is a place with a single smell (ammonia-scented), a "temperate climate," set prices and wide hallways. Like the fast-food restaurant and factory, the shopping mall is globally recognizable; its smells and sights bring the same comfort at home as they do around the globe: the comfort of familiarity, of participation within a communal act by marking the body, through fashion and ownership, into a highly valued commodity. In Chua's description, the people in the mall are processed through an "oppression of the senses," to

"surrender lives that are too complex to be lived any longer" (Chua 1998: 35). He describes looking at jewelry as a way of "shed[ding] one of your cumbersome presences." This language of "surrender" and "shedding" as one walks through the mall's corridors, is akin to that of microchips being processed through the assembly line. It is through direct participation in the mall that subjects are "processed" into consumer-subjects, that they "ascend" the street urchins. The mall thus plays a role similar to that of a factory, where the ammonia-scented, air-conditioned simulacrum of public space produces not material commodities such as microchips, but subjects who desire belonging to a global imaginary.

By analogizing the mall with the factory, I do not mean to depict the individual as a machine without agency, or, as Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it, as a "tabulae rasae on which global capitalism's moving finger writes its message" (Appiah 2006: 113). Similar to the utilization of *latah* and Islam by the managers in the factory, the shopping mall does not erase cultural difference, but redefines and reifies it through the sale of cultural styles and interests. In "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," Michael Warner maps the crossovers of consumerism and the public sphere through identities based on difference. According to Warner, participation within consumer-culture is a means of access to an abstract community, where "consumer capitalism makes available an endlessly differentiable subject" (Warner 1992: 384). Consumer capitalism thus appropriates a politics of multiculturalism that allows "ethnicity" and "difference" to be performed through the consumption of products, brands and cultural icons (Warner 1992: 385). We cannot then interpret the shopping mall's

production of subjects as a homogeneous force that is always opposed to the ethnic, cultural or national identity of its subjects. Rather, because mass consumerism “makes available an endlessly differentiable subject,” Chua’s unnamed narrator is able to simultaneously participate in the consumerism of the shopping mall and to assess Thong as his own ego-ideal of Thai belonging within that mall. To climb the ladder of belonging to a global imaginary, in other words, is to incorporate one’s own cultural differences into a system of consumer-based differentiation enabled by consumer participation.

If the mall in Chua’s novel functions as a means of producing consumer-subjects upon a ladder of cultural development, then the final ego-ideal of belonging to a global imaginary must always be invoked by an ambivalent object of desire—“ambivalent” because it is always shifting, always “on the cusp” of being fully realized. In the next section, I argue that this stratification from the “bottom rung” of unskilled wage laborers up to an ideal, “full belonging” within global capital—the place perhaps of the “flexible citizen”—produces an ambivalent, unreachable object of desire invoked by spaces of global belonging—an end to the ladder. Apparatuses of a global capitalism, such as the mall, offer not only the ability to belong as a consumer-subject, but also the possibility of ‘full belonging’ within a global imaginary.

### **In transit**

Where are you from? The suspicion always cuts like a knife. Where do you want me to be from? The same question on both sides of the tropic. In smoky

bars. In the light of day. I lie under the sun, hoping it will bake the answer into my skin. Bake my belonging. But it’s not me that’s lying back this afternoon, it’s just my skin. (Chua 1998: 121)

For Martina, the desire to belong to a global imaginary creates a hierarchy of identities, but she is kept from “full belonging” through markers of difference. The narrator, on the other hand, inhabits an unstable identity that keeps him from ‘fitting in,’ but also allows him to reveal the different stratifications within a global imaginary. This unstable subject should be understood as transcultural or “transitive,” and is similar to Robert Park’s “Marginal Man,” who “lives in two worlds, in both of which he is more or less of a stranger” (Park 1950: 356). As one who struggles to belong within any ethnic or cultural group, “the marginal man” is rather seen as marginal to both (Park 1950: 356). Through a cultural identity that appears arbitrary and cast upon him by others, Chua’s narrator shows how forces of global capitalism utilize the desire to belong as a means of reproducing class relations. As a traveler and nomad, he cannot be hailed into an identity that fits easily into the structure of the global imaginary, but must categorize himself into a type of non-belonging. This self-categorizing articulates a shared social stigmatization that works to expose the contradictions inherent within an ideological structure.

The unnamed narrator’s unstable identity reveals structures of stratified ethnicities most often when its “unstableness” keeps the narrator from belonging within a particular space. As a Southeast Asian American in the West, he must continually

be given value by his white partner, Jim. In a French subway, the narrator is harassed by “ten men in black paramilitary uniforms who threw me violently against a wall” (Chua 1998: 56). Once the policemen realize that he is American, they pat him on the back, just as his white boyfriend, Jim, returns from the toilet. Only after the incident does the narrator realize that during the attack, his skin became “an act of resistance” (Chua 1998: 58): “Jim gave me the appearance of belonging,” the narrator says, “to a place, to a time, to him. As decoration, I wasn’t always able to articulate my value, but Jim knew it intrinsically” (Chua 1998: 57). The very skin that Chua’s narrator embodies, that of a Southeast Asian unknown, necessitates Jim’s presence to protect him from racial profiling simply by being alongside him as a constant symbol warranting his social value to belong. As an Asian living in the West, the narrator must continually re-obtain his own value through Jim’s gaze. This need is later used to break their relationship completely when, in a heated argument, Jim makes a distress call to the police, and upon their arrival, he refuses to identify the narrator as his housemate: “He told them I was trespassing. That they should arrest me. I begged them to let me call our next door neighbor, who could vouch for my identity” (Chua 1998: 59). The belonging that the narrator feels as an American is only recognized by others insofar as he maintains the value given to him by his partner Jim. “But,” as the narrator says, “it was the value I now knew was less than the worth of my skin. Skin the color of decay. Another layer crumbling in the rinse” (Chua 1998: 60). Here, the tendency towards racial stratification is not simply limited to the Malaysian factory. If racialization is the process through which the global imaginary excludes the ideal of

“full belonging” to workers in Malaysia’s EPZs, then, for Chua, a similar type of exclusion also keeps racialized citizens from fully belonging in the West.

The social theorist Etienne Balibar called such Western racism “neo-racism.” He names it a racism that utilizes biological heredity as a signifier of cultural difference, exposes thresholds to tolerance, and demands that minorities keep within respective cultural boundaries (Balibar 1991: 26). To Balibar, “neo-racists” see cultural differences, not biological ones, as essential and static, and it is simply color that acts as a signifier for this stagnation. “Neo-racist” is one way of understanding the racial stratification that occurs in Chua’s novel, both in the export processing zones, where Malayan workers are subjected to restrictions by their own cultural “stagnation,” and in the French subway, where the policemen racially profile the narrator to assess his belonging. To Balibar, this racism is based on a sociological cultural difference according to which “aptitudes and dispositions which a battery of cognitive, sociopsychological and statistical sciences...[strike] a balance between hereditary and environmental factors” (Balibar 1991: 26). Though some may see culture as fluid, within an ever-changing hybridity, to “neo-racists,” cultural difference is static, and this justifies the division of labor. As Hardt and Negri say in their analysis of neo-racism, “from the perspective of imperial race theory...there are rigid limits to the flexibility and compatibility of cultures. Differences between cultures and traditions are, in the final analysis, insurmountable” (Hardt 2000: 192). Rather than essentializing skin color outright, the neo-racist uses skin-color to “suspect” cultural difference, and looks for signs that might determine the subject’s

cultural position as one who belongs. When there is no such sign, he invokes an “insurmountable cultural difference” to legitimate racist treatment. Neo-racism then carries the presumption that all racialized subjects act their race.

In Chua’s novel, this neo-racism does not seem confined to the geography of the first world, but is present in the scenes in the subway, the racialized labor in factory, and in the spaces of the mall. As in the case between Chua’s narrator and Jim, neo-racism operates through a system of referrals that classify subjects as either valued or devalued, or, as Lisa Marie Cacho calls it, the “deviant” or the “respected” (Cacho 2007: 12). To Cacho, the deviant racial minority is seen as a subject in excess of “ideological codes” that are “used for deciding which human lives are valuable and which ones are worthless” (Cacho 2007: 186). In the United States, Jim does the work of “ideological coding” when he assesses the value of the narrator, allowing the narrator to be recognized as one who belongs. Similarly in Penang, the ideological code of the microscope allows Martina to belong as a “free worker.” Finally, in the mall, commodities such as the gold ring differentiate between the “deviant” Thai—a poor street girl on the mall steps—and those “respected” who belong. These ideological codes allow the racialized subject to belong as “respected” subjects, but always “in spite” of their race. It is also no minor thing that the “de-valued” in Chua’s novel are often women, and even the female street urchin is identified as “lower” than Thong. The very necessity of these codes suggests a presumed devaluation of the subject due to their marks of race, gender or queerness, since Jim, as we see in the apartment, can refuse

to identify the narrator as one who legitimately belongs.

In Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of neo-racism, Žižek finds that the presumptions of culture onto racialized subjects can be seen as a means of ascribing different ideologies, all of which imply a normative ‘multiculturalist’—one who is able to place racialized subjects as subjects ‘stuck’ in an ideology or cultural way of thinking. To Žižek, ideology itself “is always self-referential, that is, it always defines itself through a distance towards an other dismissed and denounced as ideological” (Žižek 1994: 37). The placement of this dismissal onto the racialized subject implies, by the privilege of presuming the ideology of others, a normative, “gazing” subject of neo-racism. Žižek identifies this subject not as a “normative white,” but as “the multiculturalist” who defines himself as a cosmopolitan by referring to other ideological ethnicities. As Žižek says, “contemporary ‘postmodern’ racism is the symptom of multiculturalist late capitalism, bringing to light the inherent contradiction of the liberal-democratic ideological project” (Žižek 1994: 37). Seeing ethnicities—or cultural ways of life—as “ideologies” thus allows the “non-ethnic” white to presuppose superiority, since they themselves are not required to prove that they are not “stuck in ideology”—that they are, in fact, “ethnic-free.”

The desire to become “ethnic-free” is a common theme in *Gold by the Inch*, in both the narrator’s extreme cynicism of the everyday Malay culture, and in Martina’s fascination with the microchip rather than the nearby mosque. To be “ethnic-free,” in this sense, and by not belonging or refusing to belong to an ethnicity, one implicitly belongs within a

global community, one of “multiculturalism” or “cosmopolitanism.” The ambivalent ideal of the global imaginary—the top of the cultural ladder—can now be seen as being “ethnic free,” or for lack of a better word, “cosmopolitan.” The cosmopolitan ideal is similar to that of an ideal liberalism posited by the political philosopher Charles Taylor, as a politics that “must remain neutral on the good life” (Taylor 1992: 57). To Taylor, the liberal ideal is that each individual be free to choose or not choose an identity through “neutral institutions” like the University, the mall, and perhaps even multinational fast-food restaurants. Chua’s novel shows us, however, that neutral institutions, such as the factory and the mall, are in fact cultural institutions of both the local and the global, and this ideal of “neutrality” is in fact a “way of thinking” in itself, containing values and myths. As Balibar tells us:

the cultures supposed implicitly superior are those which appreciate and promote ‘individual’ enterprise, social and political individualism, as against those which inhibit these things. These are said to be the cultures whose ‘spirit of community’ is constituted by individualism. (Balibar 1991: 25)

Individualism, to Western eyes, may appear as a universal, “non-ethnic” way of thinking. Such is the ruse of global belonging. As with the myths of *latah*, “individualism” does not exhaust the cultural attitudes of “the global,” since cultural difference is also utilized by global capitalism to sustain itself. Through juxtaposing the experiences of third world workers in factories with the narrator’s experience in shopping malls and subways,

Chua’s novel maps out the racial logics of a global community that explores the ways in which multiculturalism has taken on forms of neo-racism by presuming an ideologically trapped “other” in the racialized subject.

In the same way that neo-racism appears to be anti-racist, but invokes race as a sign of cultural insurmountability, so the global imaginary appears to be “ethnic-free,” but invokes ethnicity through continual acts of referring to “ethnics” as “stuck in an ideology.” The global imaginary can then be seen as a “way out” of a single ethnicity, appearing as an all-inclusive antithesis to modern notions of exclusion, patriarchy and traditionalism. Hardt and Negri make this very argument in *Empire*: “The ideology of the world market has always been the anti-foundational and anti-essentialist discourse *par excellence*” (Hardt 2000:150). They continue: “the old modernist forms of racist and sexist theory are the explicit enemies of this new corporate culture” (Hardt 2000: 153). Hardt and Negri identify the world market itself as an ideology, one where market goods are seen as “anti-essentialist,” but that organize cultural differences in the interests of marketing and profit “by the imposition of new hierarchies...by a constant process of hierarchization” (Hardt 2000: 155). Once a structural hierarchy is articulated and fully recognized, the market ideology becomes always “the way out” of that hierarchy, while the old hierarchies are seen as ethnic, cultural, or mere ideology. Here we can identify the global imaginary itself as no less ideological than a “nation” or an ethnicity, which all must utilize ideologies and cultural “ways of thinking” onto the Other to hide its own “dominant particular” (Hall 1997: 67). The global imaginary thus utilizes the “ideology of the world market”

to create normative members who fully belong by being “ethnic free,” and Others who are members but are not “proper subjects,” or who are “too ethnic.” This conception of “the global” as a construct of “non-ethnicity” suggests that there is not one global imaginary, but many global imaginaries, each offering incentives of ethnic escape and global belonging.

As a transitive cultural subject, the narrator in *Gold by the Inch* eludes categorization, since his “ethnicity” is always unstable. In the West he finds himself in an apparently anti-racist, “global” culture, yet he feels forced to emigrate from the United States, surrendering to the demand to act out his own racial background: “Your skin is your uniform. A beacon and a membrane...Dark, but not dark enough to hide your insides. Skin that betrays difference. Foreignness. Contagion ...Where are you from? The suspicion always cuts through like a knife” (Chua 1998: 121). Chua’s narrator realizes that it is due to his skin color that he can never experience being “ethnic-free,” and though he may “feel” cosmopolitan, without Jim, the suspicion of being an outsider follows him everywhere. His skin cannot be cast-aside. Rather, it exposes the very contradictory nature of the global imaginary by denying his belonging in a supposedly anti-racist imaginary. Yet Jim refuses to see these contradictions: “When I had told Jim what had happened [in the Subway] he didn’t believe me,” the narrator says, “He was certain I had made up the story just to amuse him” (Chua 1998: 57). The narrator’s skin is his exclusionary mark, one that allows him to discover contradictions within the global imaginary that his white partner, Jim, either cannot see, or chooses to ignore. As the narrator says after the incident, “things

like that never happen when we are together” (Chua 1998: 57).

The narrator’s disillusion with the West as a global imaginary invokes his desire to travel to Southeast Asia, yet as he travels, so his skin, his queerness, his language and his American cultural practices travel with him. Though the desire to belong to his “race” comes as a reaction to the “pushing” of the West into a racial category, his own way of thinking does not align with his “racial communities” of Thai, Chinese or Malaysian culture. He must belong to his skin, yet his skin does not suggest any particular cultural essence, and in fact, changes easily with the season. On a Malaysian beach, the narrator lies “under the sun, hoping it will bake the answer into my skin. Bake my belonging. But it’s not me that’s lying back this afternoon, just my skin” (Chua 1998: 121). Even among his own kinship, the narrator is still an impostor. Rather than uniting under common principles, values, beliefs or interests, the narrator internalizes the Western gaze and reduces belonging entirely to his skin. Yet in a Western racial formation, his skin and mixed heritage are enigmatic, and mark him as an ambiguous Other. He is not quite Chinese, not quite Malaysian, and not quite Thai, but definitely not white. His attempts to belong to his race are shattered when he discovers his grandmother’s grave, and rather than discovering his “true self” through the invocation of the matriarch, he realizes that “there is no prepackage of identity or ethnic heritage left to possess. No folk tales passed on from Grandmother’s knee. No warm flavors of home pathetically re-created on the other side of the planet. Nothing. Nothing but a hole in the ground” (Chua 1998: 135). Instead of the history and ethnic heritage that the narrator expects, the grave invokes

the same alienation and despair that he felt in the “host countries” of the West.

### The airport

Home is not defined by the walls that contain us but by the community in which we participate. Home is not a place to be owned or mortgaged. In a sense, home is nowhere. (Chua 1997: 13)

At the end of *Gold by the Inch*, with no options of belonging left, the unnamed narrator reflects on his own desire to belong and rejects that desire. Unable to belong to romantic relationships dependent upon monetary transactions, the narrator plunges into the vast, illimitable world of travel, armed with no identity formation but anti-identity, with no community collectivity other than the “abject.” His unstable identity becomes a cultural form among the abjected. He becomes a subject who, as Viet Nguyen says, “refuses to be hailed by dominant ideology [but] can also refuse to be hailed by resistant ideology” (Nguyen 2002: 157). Chua’s narrator surrenders to his loss of belonging through his love for his Thai lover, Thong, and admits the artificiality of such belonging:

You will build your love on a lie. A lie so beautiful that you will forget it’s pure fiction...you call the airline. There are still seats on the plane back to New York the next day. Flights to Hong Kong every few hours. Tokyo. Taipei. Dubai. Beirut. Berlin. Los Angeles. Flights to anywhere. The world is yours. (Chua 1998: 205)

Rather than live within a “beautiful lie,” the narrator chooses the abject self of unrestrained freedom, denying forms of cultural, national, racial or ethnic collectivity; instead, he finds solace in the arbitrariness of his own identity. With no direction left, he seeks belonging among the world of plane tickets and visa bribes.

Yet, the airport too, as a so-called “neutral institution,” functions as a factory in its production of global subjects, where the desire to belong reaches its apex in production, not of commodities, but of experience itself: of trips, of tourist opportunities, of cultural and social capital, of more visas on one’s passport, of experiential knowledge provided through airplanes, petroleum and mass amounts of labor power. This repetition of the airport as another “neutral institution” might have led to Stephen Sohn’s conclusion that “the novel does not exact any closure; instead, it offers a replicating narrative of the process of sexual exploitation and hedonism that overpowers the efficacy of political and historical knowledge” (Sohn 2006: 107). However, as a hybrid subject belonging neither to ethnicity, family, religion, place, nor with a lover, at the novel’s end, the narrator’s belonging appears instead through a return to global migrancy, through a global imaginary not of cosmopolitan subjects, but of global “rejects.” As the narrator says during his trip in France: “I felt strangely at home here, amid the trophies of civilization. At first I thought I was in the midst of someone else’s civilization. I couldn’t easily be called Thai or Chinese or Malaysian or American, but I certainly wasn’t French” (Chua 1998: 56). As one who inhabits a transitive identity, the narrator is able to see a country he has never visited before as both “strangely home” and at the same time “someone

else's civilization." He never quite claims ownership, but also never quite feels alien to it. The novel's end suggests a reinterpretation of belonging as either "belonging to," in the sense of ownership and property, and "belonging with," in the sense of "going along with" or "to relate to." In the first sense, "belonging to," functions within exchange relationships, and can be consumed as any ethnic food or trinket. Chua's ending disrupts this gesture when he writes "You thought this was something in which you wouldn't have to participate. Thought this was a story you could just watch unravel. A consuming stain that stops short of where you're standing. No." (Chua 1998: 208). The "you" in this passage implicitly refers to Jim, yet by never mentioning the character by name, the narrator's refusal to be commodified extends to include the reader.

"Belonging with," on the other hand, suggests a type of belonging without ownership, one that does not own "home," but rather feels "strangely home." Slavoj Žižek's notion of "real universality" is useful to us here, where "real universality" is "identifying universality with the point of exclusion," a type of belonging among an abject community of hybrids, none of which can be called a "normative subject" (Žižek 1997: 51). This envisioned universality, while perhaps idealistic and formal, aims not at decentering the normative subject, but at extinguishing it altogether.<sup>4</sup> Though the airport can easily be seen, like the factory and the mall, as a place that produces a "global subject," for Chua's novel the airport symbolizes a type

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<sup>4</sup> This could very well be what John Cruz envisions in his calls for an end to a politics of difference: "multiculturalism is necessary but not sufficient," he says, "Multiculturalism is not enough. It has to be reconceptualized as means rather than ends" (Cruz 1996: 37).

of real universality. As he lies in bed with Jim, the narrator begins to "feel many things":

The open door of every consciousness. A plane streaks toward a place I've only heard of before. Somewhere. A city where a familiar language crackles on the pavement. I've heard its songs. Their meanings beat against a fading alarm. Five A.M. It's almost time to go. My eyes brace against a white dawn. Fireflies light the way home. (Chua 1998: 208)

His last words stress the desire for a new way of belonging, one with "a familiar language" but in a place he has never been. "Home," for the narrator, cannot exist in a place, but exists only within travel itself, not just as that experience produced through the airport-factory, but as the condition of traveling through different cultural forms and identities, where it is always "almost time to go." "Travel" in this sense offers a way of "belonging with" that posits the abject itself as the ambivalent ego-ideal of desire.

Chua's ending invites the reader to "belong with" an unstable identity, producing belonging where none previously existed. The novel's ending finds similarities in the desire to belong to a global imaginary, from the factory to the airport, and seeks to answer those desires by invoking "belonging" through the journey itself, until so many spaces and contexts have reinterpreted one's identity that only the unstable conflict remains. By producing such a mode of "travel," Chua reinterprets "belonging to" a collectivity as a property that says little about the material essence of an individual, but

rather, is seen as a Nietzschean pure concept—a “conventional fiction for purposes of designation, mutual understanding, not explanation” (Nietzsche 1966: 33).

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