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RENAISSANCE CITY AND REVENANT STORY

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The Gothic Tale as Literary Technique in Fiona Cheong's Fictions of Singapore

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Cheong
Fiona
gothic
neoliberalism
novel
postcolonial
Singapore

*Fiona Cheong's two novels about Singapore, *The Scent of the Gods* and *Shadow Theatre*, should be read as gothic tales of self-writing in which the protagonist emerges as an objective rather than a subjective self. This essay draws on Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault's discussion of technology and poetics, together with Jacques Rancière's conceptualization of aesthetics, to argue that Cheong's novels are a narrative renovation of an older literary genre (the gothic) for contemporary purposes. *Scent's* invocation of the gothic spaces complicate the allegorical yoking of family history and nation formation, while *Shadow Theatre's* polyphonic and gynocentric structure creates an alternative social and narrative space within heroic, patriarchal nationalism. Both novels deploy gothic tropes immanently to critique the postcolonial Singaporean state's neoliberalizing technologies that shape individuals and the entire population as entrepreneurial subjects.*

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This essay makes a case for considering contemporary fiction as a set of techniques or techniques for writing the self in a global moment dominated by

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neoliberalization and its pervasive technologies of subject formation. By ‘self-writing’ I refer to narratives whereby fictional protagonists (often first-person narrators) emerge as objective rather than subjective presences through their encounter with other selves, imagining potential sociopolitical relations without necessarily realizing them. Regarding literature as a technic is to see it in terms of what Michel Foucault, discussing Classical ethics, calls a *tekhne tou biou* (the art of life or the know-how of living), which in turn is part of the larger project of the care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*). This is distinct from an understanding of literature’s function as originary or organic *poiesis* or the constitution of singular or collective subjects, whether these subjects are individuals, communities or nation-states.

Reading Fiona Cheong’s two novels, *The Scent of the Gods* and *Shadow Theatre*, as technics of relation and self-writing rather than poetics of subjectivity and self-identity reveals how contemporary fiction performs two critical functions: first, it maps neoliberalism’s subject-forming technologies of efficient, economic optimization with regard to one particular polity (Singapore); second, it interrogates these technologies by imagining sociopolitical relationships that have been foreclosed through the grip of neoliberal rationality. This is something both Cheong’s fiction and Cheong herself invite us to do. In an interview, Cheong states that as she wrote her novels she ‘was becoming interested in the architecture of narrative itself, and [she] wanted to really play with literary form’ (Bow 2010, 257). Furthermore, the preface to her second novel, *Shadow Theatre*, informs us that the narratives collected therein ‘tell of a race of women who still speak the language of the dreamer, who write in a saltwater wind, and breathe like the changing light over the sea’ (Cheong 2002, xii). More than just reportage, this sentence holds our attention with its powerful synesthesia: the textuality of writing is described in arresting kinetic and olfactory terms as ‘a saltwater wind’ and the rhythm of human breathing is presented visually as the ‘changing light’ reflecting off a shifting sea. This description foregrounds women’s prowess or *tekhne* regarding language and writing, a prowess that is vitally connected to their sense of self as corporeal and discursive beings – one might say it is an ‘art of life’ (Foucault 1997b, 259).

This lapidary sentence and Cheong’s personal remarks encourage us to approach the architecture of Cheong’s fictional narrative as an ‘aesthetics of existence’ involving the ‘elaboration of one’s own life as a personal work of art’ (Foucault 1988, 49) through a style of writing and giving structure to one’s self without solipsistic ‘self-attachment’ (1997b, 269). Instead, the aesthetics of existence when regarded as part of the care of the self means “‘working on” or “being concerned with” something’ and ‘describes a sort of work, an activity; it implies attention, knowledge, technique’ (Foucault 1997b, 269) that also ‘implies complex relationships with others’ intending their ‘well-being’ (1997a, 287). Scholars of life narrative have theorized



‘self-referential writing as an intersubjective process’ requiring a focus on
 ‘processes of communicative exchange and understanding’ (Smith and
 Watson 2001, 13). This is consonant with Foucault’s aesthetics of existence,
 but my own formulation of self-writing differs somewhat from life narrative
 because the self or selves in Cheong’s novels are not intimately connected to
 the author’s own personal history or background. Instead of self-reference,
 what occurs might be more properly termed *self-inference*: I argue Cheong’s
 Gothic interpolations combine Foucault’s aesthetics of existence (one’s life
 is an object inscribed and artistically configured) and Jacques Rancière’s expli-
 cation of aesthetics as a distribution of sensibility (art reconfigures our objec-
 tive sense of what is perceivable and intelligible). This conjunction of self-
 objectivating and philosophical aesthetics illustrates how Cheong’s fiction is
 a technic or technique of self-relation. It offers an account of an individual
 (who is not necessarily Cheong herself) and also forms and imagines connec-
 tions with other individuals and groups through other modes of configuring a
 self.

My focus on the aesthetics of existence and literary or formal aesthetics
 heeds the call of scholars in postcolonial studies who argue aesthetics has
 been critically neglected in the field. Robert Young suggests ‘a focus on aes-
 thetics’ can ‘enhance our sense of why the interventions that writers make
 work so effectively as literature’ rather than as anthropology or sociology
 (2014, 5); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ‘propose[s] that the training of the
 imagination that can teach the subject to play – an aesthetic education –
 can also’ work towards ‘displacing belief’, ideology or dogma ‘onto the
 terrain of the imagination’ and hence open them up to contestation (2012,
 10). Cheong’s fiction combines an aesthetics of existence enhanced by the dis-
 turbing sensuousness of gothic tropes to displace nationalist narratives and
 neoliberal technologies onto an imaginative plane, in order to illuminate
 and critique them. This critique is assayed through a literary prowess or
tekhne, which performs a narrative renovation of the state’s exuberant dis-
 course of technocratic innovation through literary devices.

Central to Singapore’s trajectory of postcolonial development after inde-
 pendence in 1965 is its strategic self-positioning as a global hub for trade,
 finance and the creative industries through a state-driven politics of exception,
 which mobilizes optimizing technologies directed at both individuals and the
 population as a whole. Technologies of subjectivity ‘induce self-animation
 and self-government so that citizens can optimize choices, efficiency, and com-
 petitiveness’ while technologies of subjection ‘inform political strategies that
 differently regulate populations for optimal productivity, increasingly
 through spatial practices that engage market forces’ (Ong 2006, 6). This
 creates a sociopolitical milieu marked by a combination of meritocratic
 achievement and charismatic leadership, culminating in a robust regime
 that blends technocracy and authoritarianism. Singapore’s ruling elite,

possessing professional expertise often obtained from US and British universities through scholarships from government ministries or statutory boards, is apparently ‘above sectional interests and ideology’ and committed to the ‘unidirectional drive towards development, prosperity, and modernity’ (Barr 2005, 3). Viewed within the framework of Singapore’s neoliberal globalization, the ‘dazzling metaphor’ of a ‘renaissance city’ may suggest a “rebirth” of culture and the arts, the economy, and the physical city itself’ (Tan 2007, 1), but it is also a figure of subjectivity and subjection connoting the state’s postcolonial repackaging of its historical status as a pivotal port-city within the British Empire. This time, however, Singapore’s centrality on the global stage is managed through technologies of neoliberal optimization rather than manifested through ideologies of colonial oppression.

The marshalling of technological thinking for the management of modern life was foreseen by Martin Heidegger. In ‘The Age of the World Picture’ Heidegger discusses how *tekhne* can offer an immanent critique of the technological domination of the modern world.

By technology Heidegger means a shift in human ‘praxis’ towards ‘the employment of mathematical physical science’ as the primary and preferred means of relating to the world around (1977a, 116). Technological thinking makes ‘human capability’ seem to be ‘constituted by’ human ingenuity alone for ‘the purpose of gaining mastery over’ the world (Heidegger 1977a, 132). In ‘A Question Concerning Technology’ Heidegger further analyses the modern world picture as a mode of ‘enframing’ (*Ge-stell*), rendering both the world and humanity as ‘standing-reserve’ (1977b, 19). Such an enframing not only commodifies the natural and the human world, it also ‘drives out every other possibility of revealing’ that might be derived from ‘the sense of *poiesis*’ (1977b, 27). *Poiesis*, for Heidegger, is more than poetry; it is a ‘bringing-forth’ in the sense of realization or fruition, which applies to both natural organisms and artificial objects (1977b, 11). Heidegger does not oppose *poiesis* to *tekhne*; the latter, despite being the root word of *technology* and often associated today with soulless and precise mechanization, also ‘belongs to bringing-forth’ and ‘is something poetic’ (1977b, 13).

To wit, modern technological enframing occludes or conceals its process of rendering the world and humanity as standing-reserve while making such enframing appear to originate from human ken. ‘Instead of merely staring at the technological’, Heidegger encourages us to work through *tekhne* to hone our capacity for ‘catching sight of what comes to presence in technology’ (1977b, 32). Because ‘reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm’ that is both ‘akin’ to but also ‘fundamentally different from’ technology (1977b, 35), Heidegger concludes that art, in the broadest sense, offers a relatively autonomous realm within which such reflection and confrontation can occur. Art’s existence depends on *tekhne*, but art’s significance cannot be subsumed by technological utility.

An aesthetics of existence is a crucial aspect of Michel Foucault's research on technologies of the self in Greek and Roman philosophy: 'It was a question of making one's life into an object for a sort of knowledge, for a *tekhne* – for an art' (1997b, 271). This conception of life as an object of art differs from the reduction of art into 'the object of mere subjective experience' (Heidegger 1977a, 116) in a world of technological domination. Rather than begin with a subject of originary experience whose truth must be 'decipher[ed]' through 'psychological or psychoanalytical science' (Foucault 1997c, 225), classical technologies of the self require acts of writing, because 'taking care of oneself became linked to constant writing activity. The self is something to write about' (Foucault 1997c, 232). The self is an object shaped by writing rather than a subject whose consciousness and knowledge originate writing. Through self-writing, 'the experience of the self was intensified and widened', avoiding solipsism and culminating, ideally, in 'a sort of permanent political relationship between self and self' (Foucault 1997c, 233; 1997b, 272). Unlike Jean-Paul Sartre, who 'refers the work of creation to a certain relation to ... the author himself' in a centripetal fashion, Foucault argues we 'should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity', a centrifugal impulse that can represent and relate the lives of others (1997b, 262). If 'art is in some way always *techne* ... it also marks *techne* as noncoincident, dissimilar from itself, and as possibly resistant to unambiguously producing itself as technology' (Ziarek 1998, 194), then Foucault helps us understand Fiona Cheong's fiction as a technique of writing about a variety of selves. In sum, *tekhne* and *poiesis* are two sides of the same coin. *Tekhne*, at one extreme, instrumentalizes the world as standing-reserve; *poiesis* interrogates such instrumentalization without overthrowing *tekhne* and reveals another aspect of it (as technic/technique), through which the self unfolds within writing and sociality without being a first principle. *Tekhne*, in its poetic inflection, is a creative activity that negotiates Singapore's technocratic administration by inscribing possible relationships between selves foreclosed by neoliberal rationality's enframing.

Cheong employs literary techniques and tropes drawn from the traditional gothic tale to map out and critique the technologies of subjectivity and subjection that pervade Singapore's political and social landscape. If, in the age of the world picture, 'human activity is conceived and consummated as culture' and culture becomes 'the highest goods of man' (Heidegger 1977a, 116), then the representation of culture as part of this world picture generates a 'generalized ethnography' (Clifford 1983, 118) in which writing about any non-western society is marketed and read as an extended depiction of that society's cultural reality. If so, then the gothic tale may be considered a strategically exotic technique of framing this ethnographic impulse, critiquing it while acknowledging the position of contemporary fiction about the non-

West in the global literary marketplace. Heidegger himself gestures towards
 the gothic character of the enframing of technological domination when he 280
 glosses the German term *Gestell* as ‘some kind of apparatus, e.g., a bookrack’
 but ‘also the name for a skeleton’, and hence his own usage of the neologism
Ge-stell (enframing) ‘seems equally eerie’ (1977b, 20), as if a metaphorical 285
 skeleton lurks in the closet of technology’s projectional framework. Beneath
 technology’s enframing of both the world and humanity as standing reserve
 there stands, like an eerie gothic figure, a glimpse of technology as *poiesis*,
 as the *tekhne* that can bring forth representations and relations foreclosed
 by technology as enframing. 290

In addition to Alison Rudd and Andrew Hock Soon Ng’s analysis of
 gothic entanglements with colonialism, empire and postcolonialism,
 George Haggerty examines the interpolation of gothic tales into classical
 eighteenth-century gothic novels as ‘a process of formal insurgency’, a 295
 ‘rejection of conventional demands of the novel form’ that pits the
 ‘imagery of a nightmare’ against ‘the form and structure of the novel’
 (1989, 3). The gothic helps us trace the technocratic enframing of subjectiv-
 ity in Singapore because ‘the devices typical of Gothic fiction ... have the 300
 power to objectify subjective states of feeling’ through their ‘affective
 form’, and this objectification of the subjective ‘heighten[s] the emotional
 intelligibility of Gothic fiction’ (Haggerty 1989, 8, 14). Furthermore,
 Philip Holden observes that the gothic’s affective form, coupled with atten- 305
 tion to historical specificities, underscores ‘the tension between the affective
 and rationalizing elements of nationalism’s appeal’ (2009, 353) and ‘has the
 potential to excavate and explore anxieties attendant on nationalism’ and its
 ‘ongoing exclusions and internal colonialism after independence’ (2009, 310
 356). In sum, we might say that Cheong’s deployment of gothic elements
 is a process of formal insurgency in which the affective form of the gothic
 traces technologies of subjectivity and subjection. These technologies excep- 315
 tionalize and exclude various sectors of Singaporean society even as they
 undergird the nation’s neoliberal management of its territory and popu-
 lation. The novels at first glance offer ethnographic information about Sin-
 gapore, but readers expecting a thick description of a multi-generational
 Singaporean family during the 1960s in *Scent* or an archivally verifiable 320
 account of the multiple women’s stories in *Shadow Theatre* will no doubt
 be disappointed. Both novels play with cultural authenticity and national
 history by rewriting them through the emotional intelligibility and oneiric,
 even nightmarish, imagery of gothic tales. They may take place in Singa- 325
 pore, but her literary technique suggests they be read as ‘a way of occupying
 a place where relations between bodies, images, spaces and times are redis-
 tributed’ rather than reproduced (Rancière 2009, 22). They imagine possible
 relations of self-care and between oneself and others that may be elided by
 national and neoliberal enframing. 330

Cheong's technique of combining gothic elements with ethnography can be seen from the praise she received for creating 'a brooding, questioning sensibility' in 'an enervating tropical world' and also from the charge by the same reviewer that she 'takes on the role of the native informant, offering a potted and often incorrect history of the region' (Lim 1991, 50). Such an evaluation appraises the novel on the grounds of cultural and historical veracity, but seems to miss how *The Scent of the Gods* is less a faithful representation of Singapore's cultural reality and more a fictional rendering that objectifies Singapore's technologies of subject formation through the distortions and divagations of the gothic.

The mood and setting of the novel foreground its gothic overtones. The protagonist-narrator is the 11-year-old Su Yen, an orphaned girl living with two older cousins, Li Shin and Li Yuen (also orphans) in a multi-generational family house headed by the matriarchal Grandma. The house is described by Su Yen as a place that, although 'filled with grown-ups', had many 'big silent rooms' and walls on which were 'hung old brown-edged photographs of our dead relatives, who had lived in the house before us' and whose 'faces would reappear, still clear' (Cheong 2010, 2). This house, built by Su Yen's great-grandfather, is both a family residence and the physical embodiment of a technology of subjection, as Grandma says that it is 'the law', unwritten yet palpable, 'that called for all the generations of one family to live together under one roof' (3). Su Yen, like her cousins, is subject to constant surveillance by the adults, and this discipline is justified by Grandma 'just in case' something untoward should happen, but the matriarch cannot say exactly what this could be. Grandma thus inculcates Su Yen with an unspoken wariness towards an outside world that seems to be on the brink of a nightmare, teaching her that 'in the face of so many terrible things possible, meaningful answers were not spoken' (3). Su Yen thus sees it as her 'duty to watch and listen' (11) and observe 'the proper graces' of a young Chinese girl (9); she models her subjectivity, speech and behaviour on Grandma's powerful gothic stricture.

The disciplinary regime of Grandma's house is paralleled by the larger forces of subjective interpellation at work in Singaporean society. *The Scent of the Gods* is set in the 1960s as Singapore is becoming its own independent nation-state after the end of British colonialism and a failed merger with its neighbouring country, Malaysia. The first prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, runs the country with a patriarchal hand similar to the way Grandma runs her house, defending Singapore from communist insurgents from Malaysia and Indonesia and maintaining the superiority of the ethnic Chinese majority on the island. Prime Minister Lee's pronouncements have the most influence on Li Shin, the elder male cousin. He exhorts Su Yen to

obey her school rules because they ‘were taught to us so that we could practice discipline ... He said that the Prime Minister said discipline would turn us into a rugged society’ (Cheong 2010, 45). Li Shi’s subjectivity is forged through the rugged discipline of the new nation: he decides ‘to be a soldier when he [grows] up’ against Grandma’s wishes (20); he joins the ‘National Cadets’ who ‘were schoolboy soldiers’ (63) and patrols the beach at night watching for communist insurgents from Malaysia or Indonesia (211); he believes it is his ‘duty to protect’ the country ‘as a Singapore citizen’ just as his late father did (113), only now in Li Shin’s mind Lee Kuan Yew’s patriarchal presence is so powerful that it earns Grandma’s rebuke: ‘The Prime Minister is not your father’ (214).

Furthermore, Li Shin and Su Yen’s fathers were government agents working for ‘Central Intelligence’ to combat communism in Singapore and the rest of Asia when they were killed in a road accident together with their wives (195). Thus, Li Shin and his father are loyal citizens who are also part of Singapore’s emergent technocracy: the father is an espionage expert, while Li Shin is skilled in warfare as he is a ‘marksman’ (63) and attains the rank of captain (115) in the National Cadets. The foregrounding of technical expertise and prowess in the service of nation building comes at the expense of other forms of knowledge, skills and social relations. Uncle Tien, a communist sympathizer who later flees the country, is taking classes in ‘technical drawing’ at university but prefers ‘drawing with charcoal’, which ‘gave [him] more satisfaction’; such artistic acumen, however, is not valued in Singapore because ‘it served no purpose’ in ‘a developing nation’ that ‘needed engineers and technicians’ (84). Uncle Tien’s departure signals the foreclosure of alternate forms of knowledge and skill tied to creative technique rather than mechanical mastery.

The analogy between the precision of technical drawing and the politics of technocratic government cannot be missed: as Su Yen observes, ‘in technical drawing you were not supposed to see people’s bodies, or faces’ and all the lines ‘had to be definite and sharp’ without any ‘shadows’ (83); similarly, the new country of Singapore ‘would industrialize, and become modern, an island state where workers walking to their offices every morning could walk past flowers’ (107). Prime Minister Lee envisions Singapore’s population mobilized into a mass subject, workers whose bodies and faces are indistinct even as they have economic utility. To achieve this, sharp lines must be drawn to distinguish between citizen and ‘enemy’, something that Li Yuen (the younger male cousin) articulates at the end of the novel as ‘the country’s law’ and enforces with ‘his black toy gun’ (231). The family house with its traditional rules is analogous to Singapore’s nation-building project and technocratic imperatives – ‘no one escaped the government’s eye’ (81). Both institutions enframe their inhabitants as subjects of standing-reserve or utility, the former for the preservation of the family line, the latter for the protection and progress of the nation-state.

Cheong's gothic techniques, however, raise questions about the adequacy of such standing and severe laws in both the family and the national body. She also offers a glimpse, through a minor character, of an absent positive foreclosed by existing technologies of subject formation, a social relation formed through friendship and care of the self. Grandma's house and Su Yen's family are continuously marked by disappearance and death: after Uncle Tien the communist sympathizer flees Singapore, Grandma has the children recite 'a prayer for the newly dead' (89) and Tien's name, like those of Su Yen's and her cousins' parents, 'would never again be spoken' (225). Li Shin joins the list of the unnameable when he is mortally wounded during a night patrol and dies. The circumstances of his death are murky; it is unclear if his attackers were communist insurgents or his fellow National Cadets who mistook him for an insurgent because he was not wearing his cadet uniform. A similarly disturbing ambiguity concerns Auntie Daisy, a university student who flaunts her sexuality and has many boyfriends. Daisy is raped and becomes pregnant when she stays out late after a curfew imposed by the police to prevent agitation by communist insurgents., and it is unclear whether she was violated by these insurgents or by the state's own security forces. Daisy might be a figure lifted from a gothic tale: after her rape, she is sequestered in a corner of the family house, and Su Yen sees her 'standing at her window' that 'was barred with vertical iron rods', with unkempt hair that 'hung down to her waist,' and 'wearing nothing but a pair of black panties' (161). Out of the blue, Auntie Daisy suddenly 'screamed as if Grandma had tied her to the bed with barbed wire' (164).

Daisy's unregulated female sexuality is quarantined by the family to prevent her shame and disgrace from infecting Su Yen's innocence, but Su Yen's image of her aunt has strong gothic overtones. Daisy is the abhorrent family secret who must be imprisoned and sequestered, but her screams haunt the house like vengeful ghosts. On the night Daisy gives birth, the entire family performs a ritual to ward off *pontianak*, the evil female spirit of Malay legend, but they apparently fail because Daisy's child is stillborn (203). The ever-present but unseen threat of foreign intrusion and the pervasive fear of unpredictable state violence become spectres that haunt the novel like the tropical raindrops 'tapping like ghost fingers on the wooden steps' of the family house (87-88), undermining the definite and sharp lines drawn by Grandma and by the prime minister to protect the family and the nation, respectively, from outside contamination.

However, the family house and the nation-state do not completely exhaust the social relations that are possible in the novel. Cheong offers a glimpse of a more caring and less dominating relationship between a minor character, Susan, and Su Yen. Susan is an older girl who attends the same convent school as Su Yen and appears to be dating her cousin Li Shin. Susan looks after Su Yen, protectively 'reaching over to take [her] hand' (146) when

they walk past some uncouth labourers on the street making lewd remarks, and when Su Yen asks why her aunt is having a baby but does not have a husband, Susan stops walking and forthrightly replies that Daisy was raped. She explains to Su Yen how violent and terrible rape is, using terms that the younger girl can understand but without going into any gory details: 'A man tells you to take off your panties ... and if you don't do it, he tears them off himself' (148). In contrast to Su Yen's own family members for whom 'meaningful answers were not spoken' (3), Susan has meaningfully explained Daisy's fate but in a way that shows concern for Su Yen's feelings.

That Su Yen appreciates and accepts Susan's careful candidness can be seen from her silent but telling reaction: Susan 'pulled softly at [her] hand', Su Yen lets go of a leaf she had torn from a branch while Susan was speaking, and 'then [they] were walking again' together (148). Unlike the family house where Su Yen is a dutifully watching and listening subject, around Susan Su Yen becomes a knowing subject who recognizes and comprehends. This episode with Susan is one of the few in the novel where Su Yen finds herself in a friendly and sisterly relationship rather than one of hierarchy and dominance. Susan's truthful and tactful answer shows her care towards Su Yen but is also an indirect warning to Su Yen to be careful about herself and the sexual behaviour of men like the lewd labourers they encountered earlier. While Susan disappears from the novel after Li Shin's death and funeral, her presence shows there are other possible relations between selves available to Su Yen, even though she is often caught between the laws of family and state with their respective subject-enframing technologies.

Just as Su Yen's first-person narrative is interspersed with detailed accounts of other characters' lives, national histories and cultural memories, Cheong's second novel, *Shadow Theatre*, is replete with multiple first-person narrators and sordid family stories. Set in 1994, *Shadow Theatre* traces the homecoming of Shakilah Nair, a Singaporean woman who went to the United States and became a writer and a university professor. A pregnant and unwed Shakilah returns to Singapore to have her baby of unknown paternity while trying to finish her latest novel, but she dies in childbirth and her daughter Maria is raised by her former lover, Eve Thumboo. Shakilah herself never speaks directly; her life is recounted by her mother Valerie, her good friend Rose, her ex-lover Eve, two foreign domestic workers named Lulu and Malika, and various other women. These piecemeal accounts reveal that Shakilah was sexually abused by her father Ben and that both Ben and Alvin Thumboo, Eve's husband, preyed on young girls in the neighbourhood, even raping and murdering a Chinese girl whose ghost haunts Shakilah when she comes back to Singapore. Both men are killed by their wives: Valerie poisons Ben with a concoction she receives from a local witch doctor in a desperate attempt to make him desire her instead of Shakilah,

while Eve arranges to have Alvin killed in a road accident while he is on vacation. The novel ends with the young Maria encountering a deranged Valerie, her biological grandmother, and Eve explaining to Maria the circumstances of Shakilah's death and her birth.

The vision of a modern, developed Singapore that was nascent in *The Scent of the Gods* has come to fruition in *Shadow Theatre*, but Cheong subtly undermines it through her technique of interpolating gothic elements and turns into the celebratory narrative of nation building, because 'every Singaporean has a ghost story in the family closet' (Cheong 2002, 64).

One speaker comments that the old houses in the neighbourhood have been 'bought up mostly by modern Singaporeans with advanced technological tastes and impatient minds' (6) and the island is filled with the 'perennial slam and crash of unending construction' (8); another notes the 'whole country was getting a facelift', having 'jumped from being the third busiest port in the world ... to being the first' (30). Singapore's bustling modernity is the product of technocratic administration and neoliberal management along with racialized difference, illustrated in Cheong's earlier novel by some characters' remarks that the 'Chinese are more organized' (2010, 87) and 'hardworking' (28) than the country's Malays and Indians.

Shadow Theatre interrogates this Sinocentric national identity by presenting the women's narratives collected within its pages as 'culled from ... unofficial sources', including tales from 'Chinese and Javanese seafarers' and the legend of 'an Indian warrior-king' from the Malay Annals (2002, xii). This precolonial and somewhat apocryphal history of Singapore, in which the island was already a globalized location 'situated at a confluence of the old trade routes between East and West' (xi) with a heterogeneous population, haunts modern Singapore's Chinese exceptionalism. Rose, a librarian, suggests that because the island was part of the 'Srivijaya and Majapahit' empires existing before European colonization, women 'were cutting deals with the spirits' to protect their men while they were out 'fighting and killing' each other (65) – these spirits linger on as ghosts in the global city. The novel's gynocentric focus on female narrators 'who still speak the language of the dreamer' (xii) is contrapuntal to the phallogocentric narrative of Prime Minister Lee, who 'subscribes, without apology, to a projective model of society as an economic and social machine' (Heng and Devan 1995, 198). The women's stories form an alternative social space within Singapore; the relationships between the women are formed against a backdrop of male domination, as one narrator remarks: 'there were boys prowling about our daily lives' (Cheong 2002, 5). The women's narratives can be read as techniques of self-care, as articulations of 'recent stories and old stories or old stories with new details uncovered or reconfigured' (4) through which one's sense of self and the relations between selves are worked out and reworked over time.

The novel's polyphonic structure and gothic twists depart from the 'trope of the machine' that 'suggests that what eludes, limits, or obstructs absolute knowability, management, and control, can be routinely evacuated' (Heng and Devan 1995, 199). Shakilah Nair worries that her latest, unfinished novel will not be accepted by a US press because 'her publisher thought there were too many voices, or more precisely, too many storytellers' who 'made the story hard to follow' (Cheong 2002, 21). Her former schoolteacher Mrs Sandhu uses 'a piece of batik' as an analogy for 'how complicated and interwoven everything is' when it comes to storytelling in Singapore (24). This textual architecture departs from the single first-person narrator of *Scent* and interweaves a cast of speaking selves who are inchoate yet imbricated – like the intricate patterns of batik cloth – in Singapore's socio-cultural imaginary. This imbrication is illustrated by a game of Scrabble played by Malika, a domestic servant, with her friends, in which she forms the word 'E-X-I-L-E' by going through the 'I' of 'T-R-I-E-D' and simultaneously creating 'P-L-A-N-E' with one of her 'E' tiles; Malika could have played the word 'X-R-A-Y' to score more points, but she prefers 'the more musical word or the word cloaked in degrees of interpretation' (45). While one critic is dissatisfied with this Scrabble game because domestic servants should not have so much leisure time on their hands (Holden 2006, paragraph 11), this detail reveals how Cheong's literary technique addresses the cultural logic rather than the cultural reality of Singapore's neoliberal technologies. Her writing places the self, the 'I', in exile from everyday reality and modes of being by pushing it onto another fictional plane or aesthetic dimension. It points us towards layers of possible interpretation rather than offering an informative or transparent picture like an X-ray photograph.

Such formal techniques reject a Euro-American penchant for narrative cohesion and implicitly critique Singapore's biopolitical technologies of social engineering. As Malika's seemingly unrewarding Scrabble-playing strategy suggests, Cheong's novels require a reading that dwells on language that is elusive, obstructed or cloaked in multiple folds of meaning, undermining the national fantasy of women as labouring or reproductive 'body-machine[s]' and 'society as an equally operable contraption' (Heng and Devan 1995, 199). Although Cheong's narrators are all women, their stories ask to be considered as self-writing rather than agential speech acts of subject formation. As Valerie, Shakilah's mother, observes, 'Shakilah knew the price of speech ... Writing happens between the body and the soul. Speaking happens outside the body, always threatening the soul' (Cheong 2002, 84). This is a literary summation of Foucault's idea of writing as a technique of 'taking care of oneself' through 'constant writing activity' where 'the self is something to write about' (1997c, 232). This inference is further illustrated near the end of the novel by the instruction given by

Eve Thumboo to her adopted daughter, Maria, that she should ask her biological grandmother Valerie for her late mother Shakilah's unfinished book, 'the one she was afraid her American publisher would not accept and yet she had written it anyway, for [Maria]' (Cheong 2002, 232). Shakilah's last book, with its multitude of storytellers and 'hushed gossip and speculative references' (4), where 'truth' is glimpsed through 'the somewhat visionary texture of' disparate 'moment[s]' and 'enlightenment [is] possible only if one endured fracture and incompleteness of meaning' (144), matches the gothic style and intricate form of *Shadow Theatre* and is possibly referring to the novel itself.

This concluding self-reflexive gesture should not be understood as 'a fetishization of the pre-colonial [past] as always already postmodern' (Holden 2006, paragraph 12), but rather as a technique of self-writing whereby the self is fashioned through the intimations of gothic sensibility rather than enframed as an operable contraption. It is *Shadow Theatre's* aesthetic flourish, its formal insurgency through which literary *tekhne* is the apparatus for relational and revelatory *poiesis*, where the stories recounted in the novel's pages objectify subjective states of feeling rather than verify or substantiate ethnographic or subjective truths.

The expectation that contemporary fiction should offer ethnographic and historically accurate details about non-western cultures is part of a world picture where the significance of the non-West is important because of its store of exotic and irreducible difference, enframed as expendable standing-reserve. Fiona Cheong's novels, written and published in the United States, inhabit this world picture of necessity, but they instantiate *tekhne* as literary technique rather than enframing technology through the uncanny turns of Gothic tropes inherent in the logic of enframing itself, like the skeleton Heidegger finds tucked away in the many layers of *Gestell's* meaning.

While Singapore's neoliberal management is driven by optimizing and biopolitical technologies, *The Scent of the Gods* and *Shadow Theatre* depict an aesthetics of existence in which writing functions as a care of the self, where 'the practices and forms of visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects' (Rancière 2009, 25). Because the *tekhne* of Cheong's novels emphasizes their status as art objects rather than mobilizing subjects, their political stake 'consists in suspending the normal coordinates of sensory experience' (25) and 'adher[ing] to a sensorium different to that of domination' (30), rather than a direct political confrontation on the Singaporean state's terms of 'staging power and mass mobilization' (25). As Su Yen learns in her geography lesson, 'the equator was an imaginary line that divided the earth', but 'just because something was imaginary did not mean it could not have consequences in the real' (Cheong 1991, 43).

Cheong's fiction is an aesthetic of existence where care of the self unfolds through the gothic tale's sensibility and formal insurgency, reconfiguring *tekhne* from the realities of technological domination into a technique of bringing-forth or enframing the self through imaginary lines that intersect and connect with other selves, rather than divide up the earth into a world picture.

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