

Bio-orientalism and the Yellow Peril of Yellow Life

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Abstract

While recent literature on Asiatic racial form has drawn attention to the ways that techno-orientalism represents Asian life as mechanically non-human, the COVID-19 pandemic and other developments under the Anthropocene draw renewed attention to the construction of Asian peoples as a source of biological and contagious threat to the West. In this article I argue that a unique discourse of bio-orientalism contributes to the depiction of Asians as a "Yellow Life" that is an existential threat to Western forms of life. Western life posits that this Yellow Life must be resisted and ultimately eliminated for the flourishing of all non-Asian life. Through an attention to biological depictions of Asian life in Yellow Peril literature, I chart how bio-orientalism imagines Yellow Life as ontologically different from Western life forms and as innately animate through both its macroscopic growth and microscopic threat of contagion. Rather than embracing an Asian Americanist response that would also seek to disavow Yellow Life, in a reading of Bryan Thao Worra's poetry I speculate upon embracing Yellow Life as another mode in which Asian American studies imagines otherwise forms of life that challenge and move beyond contemporary Western-centric and humanist responses to anti-Asian racism.

Introduction

In a cynical yet intimate travelogue of late nineteenth-century Canton, Rudyard Kipling moves quickly through the main motifs that mark Asian life as a different form of life, as Yellow Life. Kipling (1907) writes of "three races who can work...but there is only one that can swarm" (255) to describe the Chinese and

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their inevitable movement against the West, to “overwhelm the world” (256). From the idea of the swarm there is the link to contagion. Kipling compares the cramped living spaces of Canton to “horrible sponges full of worms that grow in warm seas” (283). Kipling chokes “for breath in the seething streets where nothing short of the pestilence could clear a way,” casting another disease as the necessary catalyst for genocidal violence against the primary disease of an Asian space suffocating white individuality. Finally, there is the image of the ceaseless “March of the Mongol,” the “tramp of the feet on the granite blocks of the road and the breaking wave of human speech, that is not human!” (284) signaling a dangerous and unrestrained reproductive futurity to Asian life. Taking these depictions together as reality—Yellow Life as swarm, disease, ceaseless advance—Kipling concludes that “this people ought to be killed off because they are unlike any people I ever met before” (285). An ontological difference of life comes to justify genocidal violence, even as Kipling acknowledges truer reasons for anti-Asian racism in the sense that “they despise us. You can see it, and they aren't a bit afraid of us either” (285). Yellow Life here also marks a potential life form that resists the white individual, threatening for both their will to resistance and the “devil-born capacity for doing more work than they ought” (286). While Kipling professed to “wait until he marches up to me” (289), others have not felt so patient in the face of the differences they saw in Yellow Life. Kipling acknowledges his account as produced by his own “fevered imagination,” but it is a fever that is more innate to the worldview of the white individual than aberrant. This imagination orders the world between whiteness and the Yellow Life that threatens to engulf, poison, and kill the white world.

Kipling’s descriptions of a Yellow horde marching from East to West encapsulates the tropes of Yellow Peril discourse, yet also highlights the prominence of the *biological* in casting Asian life as an existential threat requiring genocidal violence to end it. Recent literature on Asiatic racial form would be drawn more to his remarks on the Asian laboring body, seeing it as a particular entanglement of racial capitalism with technoscience that functions as a privileged site for understanding the need for *and* disposability of Yellow Life. Yet by privileging the laboring body here, rather than the contagious body, scholars of anti-Asian racism may miss how the affective life of racism repeatedly returns to the biological and contagious threat of Yellow Life as what potentially exceeds capitalist violence to signify the end of the white world. Yellow Life through the terms of biological contagion names not the fear of being made obsolete, but of a threatening reproductive futurity eclipsing the white future. In the age of the COVID-19 pandemic—or as Donald Trump and many others like to call it the “China” or “Wuhan” virus to label it as an existential threat from a rising China—such depictions of Yellow Life return with a vengeance to re-racialize Asian Americans as not only eternal outsiders to the American body politic, but a toxic and contagious threat internal to that body’s biopolitical health itself.

In this article, I argue that a process of orientalism constructs “Yellow Life” as the antinomy and horizon of possibility for Western “life” as an unmarked category representing the white possessive individual as a distinct form of life. This process I term bio-orientalism for its emphasis on tropes and images of biological life to mark Yellow Life as forms of nonhuman life threatening to perpetually engulf, invade, and corrupt the West. Bio-orientalism has its origins in nineteenth-century Yellow Peril discourse, yet reappears whenever there is a crisis in the imagined security of Western life that must conjure the threat of Yellow Life as a causal agent of blame obscuring Western life’s own suicidal addiction to global white supremacy and racial capitalism. Bio-orientalism marks moments of crisis in the formation of Western life, from the twentieth-century rise of Japan, through the mid-century “loss of China” and rupture of decolonizations, to the contemporary resurgence of China threatening America’s superpower and civilizational status (Kim 2004; Prashad 2008). For over a century, Western countries conjured Asia as both the premodern that the West has decisively put behind it and the threatening future of an Asia that overwhelms and renders extinct Western life as we have come to know it. Climate-impacted crises like the COVID-19 pandemic increase the stakes and scope of bio-orientalist representations of Asia that create material consequences for Asian Americans and Asian populations globally.

Bio-orientalism plays a key role in the replication of anti-Asian racism over time and therefore calls attention to Asian American political efforts to deconstruct and fight orientalist stereotypes. While Asian American politics often responds to bio-orientalism by seeking inclusion in the unmarked life of white possessive individualism, I speculate upon an Asian Americanist response that abandons the Human for a diversity of ways of living (and life) otherwise (Lowe 1996; Okiihiro 2014). My argument then contributes to putting Asian American studies in conversation with developments in the humanities and STS, particularly in understanding the mutual processes of defining *and* racializing what counts as life itself (Cardozo and Subramaniam 2013; Lee 2014; Huang 2017; Tran 2018). To make this argument, in this article I first define bio-orientalism through an attention to what makes it different from orientalisms that highlight Asia as a *technological threat* to the future and show how in early Yellow Peril literature images of biological threat predominate. I then turn to Bryan Thao Worra’s poetry collection *Demonstra* to highlight a different archive in the history of bio-orientalism and how Worra diagnoses bio-orientalism as the potential for embracing Yellow Life as life lived otherwise (Chuh 2003). Particularly, in contrast to Donna Haraway’s famous figure of the cyborg, I focus on Worra’s figure of the *Zombuddha* that plays with recent turns to depicting the zombie as a particularly Asian threat, revealing the Zombuddha as a unique entanglement of Caribbean history, Western horror, and Laotian cosmology that begins to map other ways of embracing the otherness of Yellow Life.

Defining Bio-orientalism

Arguing that bio-orientalism produces a distinction between Yellow Life and unmarked life already shows that “life” itself never exists prior to racialization (Lee 2014; Weheliye 2014; Jackson 2015). Often unmarked life or the Human refers to the white liberal subject and the form of life they embody.¹ Scientific and popular discourses take a very particular kind of situated body—often of the white, male, able, Western subject—and treat it as the universal of subjectivity itself. By “life” I also mean the ontology of life upon which such a subject is based; this is life as bounded to bodies, singular and irreducible, and based on a vision of nature as mechanical or inert and open to the active agency of human action (Bennett 2010). C.B. Macpherson (2010) calls this kind of life the possessive individual, whose “possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them” (3). The possessive individual owns himself as property, and engages with other individuals to the degree that they can also be recognized as property owners, something often denied to racialized others. This is also inherently the gendered male body of the patriarch that imagines itself as both inviolable from outside penetration and as one with his property, which can include women, children, slaves, animals, and inanimate objects (Dubber 2005). White racial formation views the life of the possessive individual as one carefully bounded and aloof from the messiness of reality, while also master of all other forms of life (Lipsitz 2006).

This life of the possessive individual fears constantly the violation of his own boundaries through contagion and infection. Following Roberto Esposito's (2008) work on biopolitics, the possessive individual seeks immunity as “a temporary or definitive exemption on the part of the subject with regard to concrete obligations or responsibilities that under normal circumstances would bind one to others” (45). In Esposito's reading, community is the “obligation of reciprocal donation” (50) that threatens “risky contact” with otherness, so that the immunized individual seeks to restore “its own borders that were jeopardized by the common” (50). To speak of the Human, as a white liberal subject, then is to speak of this immunized possessive individual who sees his body as property, and seeks to maintain it as such, while also refusing to live in a common world with life that threatens his body as property. Through the process of bio-orientalism, Yellow Life appears as what threatens to overcome the immunized white life *and* the form of life against which the possessive individual comes into being. A necessary response to bio-orientalism therefore, I argue, is to dismantle the white possessive individual's immunized response to otherness and risk exposure to other imagined forms of life.

By emphasizing the ontology of liveliness, bio-orientalism responds to transformations in anti-Asian racism that cannot be reduced to images of Asia as the threat of technological non-life or inhuman labor. Scholarship on Asiatic racial form argues that the figure of the Asian comes into being as a misplaced but

concrete representation for the abstract violence of capitalism (Lye 2004; Day 2016). By paying attention to Asiatic racial form's relationship to capitalism, what often receives the most attention are those representations that paint the Asian body as a form of inhuman technology and labor. Such representations fit under the label of techno-orientalism, which names "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse" (Roh et al. 2015, 2). Techno-orientalism represents the linking of Asiatic racial form with technology to produce an inhuman non-life overcoming life itself, understood properly as the biologically bounded and autonomous white possessive individual. For STS, techno-orientalism helps draw attention to the ways that technology does not just produce race, but is itself already thoroughly saturated by racial categories and conceptions (Chun 2012; Benjamin 2019). Yet by the very nature of its focus, the examples and cases techno-orientalism highlights overwhelmingly favor the robotic and mechanical, losing sight of life itself as the category under contestation in anti-Asian racism.²

Distinct from yet working in tandem with techno-orientalism, which deploys technology to define the Asiatic inhuman, what I term bio-orientalism relies on biological and disease metaphors to characterize Asiatic racial form as nonhuman life, and supplements research on Asiatic racial form by drawing attention to that "bios" of life itself in biopolitics (Esposito 2008; Thacker 2011). Rachel Lee's work on theorizing the biological in Asian American studies provides a jumping off point for thinking through this bios of bio-orientalism. Lee (2014) opens her book *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America* with the question of, when Asian American Studies orients itself around discursive and economic determinants of racial formations, why do "Asian American artists, authors, and performers keep scrutinizing their body parts?" (10). She answers the question by dismissing Asian American studies' anxiety around the apparent "stolidity of the biological" (Lee 2014, 12) and instead focuses on the anxiety of "biological personhood not as fixed or singular but as multiform and distributed across time spans and spatial ecologies" (15). Lee's project, like other work under the label of new materialism, seeks to recognize that nature and matter are not mechanical or inert, but instead lively and agentic actors in their own right (Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Shomura 2017). In recognizing the agency of matter, however, Lee also brings attention to how this matter is not socially blank but already racialized; even to speak of genes or microbes already carries the specter of Asian racialization. She argues then that contemporary racism functions at scales greater and lesser than the individual body, crafting immunized populations of what I call the white possessive individual through the extraction and disposability of racialized others. This form of racism "depends upon the 'immune' subject's mystified property—bounded self-possession—in his/herself and in an array of planetary materials that in actuality remain, biologically speaking, habitats for countless others" (Lee 2014, 223). In disavowing his connection to lively matter, the white possessive individual also expresses the fear of expropriation by, in Esposito's (2008) terms, the *munis*, by what is both common and other to them. Through bio-orientalism, I argue that

Yellow Life comes to stand in for this threat to white immunity, even as to fully imagine the life of the white possessive individual requires expropriation of Yellow Life.

Rather than an attention to the biological being a novel intervention to anti-Asian racism, bio-orientalism highlights how the biological threat of Yellow Life has been a longstanding hallmark of racializing Asia as a threat to white life and white futures. To modify the definition of techno-orientalism, I view bio-orientalism as the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hyperbiological terms in cultural productions and political discourse. In bio-orientalism Asiatic racial form appears as a particular form of life that questions the contours of the possessive individual conception of life itself. Yellow Life seems to always be reproducing itself, expanding, growing—in short, spreading beyond and spilling over what should be the proper boundaries of a life form. As in other forms of orientalism, there is the representation of Asians as a group-collective that denies the possibility of individuation, but here bio-orientalism imagines that collective through vitalist terms, as an aggregate or multiplicity of the barely differentiated whose singular undecidability appears through its constant transformations. In contrast to the problem often tackled within new materialism and STS of recognizing the creative agency of matter, rather than inert and mechanical Asiatic racial form appears as *too lively and agentic*. Yellow Life becomes impossible to pin down because it refuses to stay within the proper boundaries of life, invading both the tiniest cells of the body and entire nations in its expansive growth. Yellow Life becomes what must be immunized against, the *munis* that threatens dissolution, the loss of individuality, and death for the white possessive individual (Esposito 2008).

The Yellow Peril of Yellow Life

By investigating the repertoire of biological descriptions in the literature of Yellow Peril, I show now how specifically bio-orientalism represents Yellow Life as both a threat to white life and the horizon for the definition of life as such. I take as my exemplars Jack London and the American Federation of Labor's report *Meat vs. Rice* (Gompers and Gutstadt [1902] 1908). Reading them together highlights both the tropes of bio-orientalism and how those tropes impact political and scientific discourse on the nature of Yellow Life and the genocidal response towards it. They also highlight that, while often Yellow Peril discourse focused on the laboring male body of production as a threat to white labor, reading them through the lens of bio-orientalism shows the fear of a different kind of productivity in the growth of Asian life and the Asiatic futurity it heralds.

Jack London's minor story "The Unparalleled Invasion" (1910) is particularly remarkable in its vision of Asia and Yellow Life, and its argument for the necessity of genocidal violence for the subsequent thriving of the Western world. The story opens in 1976 written as a historical retrospective on when "the trouble between

the world and China reached its culmination" (London 1990, 270). The trouble is that there are simply too many Chinese—"There were two Chinese for every white-skinned human in the world" (275)—and the threat of this unprecedented population growth demands a response. Interestingly, London depicts his China not as a warmonger, which he depicted Japan as after the Russo-Japanese War and in his seminal *Yellow Peril* journalism. His language in "The Unparalleled Invasion" echoes techno-orientalism in that "China was to be feared, not in war, but in commerce" (273), so that China's mixture of population and Western technology makes it an industrial powerhouse. London as narrator, however, notes that in fearing commerce "the real danger was not apprehended" (273). The logic of the story and the white possessive individual reader it imagines is that the pure fact of so many Chinese is one of horror that demands intervention, as it becomes clear in the story that the threat of the Chinese is the threat of Yellow Life itself.³

London's creation of Yellow Life hinges on depicting it as both epistemologically and ontologically other than the life of the white possessive individual. London's starting point in crafting a biological difference between China and the West is that there is "*no common psychological speech*" (London 1990, 270) that allows communication or commensuration (Hayot 2007). Instead, the "Western mind penetrated the Chinese mind but a short distance when it found itself in a fathomless maze" with no escape, and so, according to the narrator, both are "mental aliens" (London 1990, 271) to each other. Just as science fiction often posits the incomprehensibility of alien consciousness, so does London slot Asiatic racial form into the same level of incomprehension. Here the Chinese are not simply a racial other that resists communication, but a completely different form of alien life that prevents any communication. Yet the story quickly replaces the danger of the impossibility of communication with the "inscrutable oriental" by the real threat of Chinese life as ontological difference in addition to epistemological difference, as an explosive form of life whose very growth is what threatens the West. The danger of China is simply the "fecundity of her loins" (274)—also an example of London's consistent gendering of China the nation-state as a woman. In describing the danger of Chinese life in its fecundity, London displaces any individual Chinese with the struggle between China as an aggregate life form and the rest of the world. When it comes to describing the war between China and the rest of the world, China avoids confrontation but withdraws "like a turtle into her shell" until it can surround and "swallow up" the invaders in "China's cavernous maw" (275). Initially, China is decisively victorious as Western (white) nations cannot catch up with China's population or the "over-spilling monstrous flood of life...her flood of yellow life" (276). This language of penetration, fecundity, and maw points not just to Yellow Life as a racialized threat, but also as an object of horror for the masculine individual (here represented by London himself). The peculiarly feminized labor of Yellow Life in its own ceaseless *reproduction* absent from patriarchal control, and that itself points to the

patriarch's fear of being feminized and rendered disposable himself as an agent reproducing white futures.

London's solution to this bio-orientalist problem of Yellow Life towards white reproduction imagines the literal genocide of Chinese people. London's story instinctively deals in populations as actors and so puts at the center its own biopolitical logic, a logic that as Foucault (2003) outlines necessitates the fact that some must die in order for the rest to live. The "unparalleled invasion" of the story's title is not actually the endless growth of Yellow Life—a macroscopic threat—but instead the microscopic threat of mass germ warfare to extinguish Yellow Life, the attack of "every virulent form of infectious death" (London 1990, 279). Microscopic life represents life at the threshold of the organic and inorganic that mocks the very boundaries of life itself (Thacker 2011). In one sense, this introduction of the microscopic is merely symmetrical to London's representation of Yellow Life: both are invasive, overcome boundaries, lack "mind" as such, and refuse categorization as "life" within a bounded white possessive individual. London, through his story, posits it as a natural effect that Yellow Life and microscopic life cancel each other out. After this genocide, the white nations of the world "humanely" divide China amongst themselves without warfare and begin the "great task, the sanitation of China" (London 1990, 281). At the end of the story, a "vast and happy intermingling of nationalities" (281) settle in China and produce much wealth and cultural riches. Yellow Life becomes the horizon against which these national subjects can be consolidated, and indeed the very possibility of white difference and its overcoming hinges on the threat and eradication of Yellow Life.

While London's story represents a threat that is both over there in China itself and in a speculated future of 1976, the same discourse of bio-orientalism circulated through popular texts and political discourse in turn-of-the-century America to describe the urgent problem of Asia's spread (Frayling 2014). While London's literary language expresses his bio-orientalism, such tropes were not limited to fictional depictions of Asia but expressed their greatest force in shaping American policy towards Asians, recasting Yellow Life as a problem of public health (Shah 2001). For example, while scholars have paid attention to the American Federation of Labor's famous tract promoting Asian exclusion laws, *Meat vs. Rice*, to analyze the ways that it defines Asian labor in distinction to white labor, in explicitly invoking the authority of public health officials it draws on the language of bio-orientalism to describe the inevitable threat of Asian life and the need to meet it with genocidal violence (Lye 2004; Huang 2019). From a techno-orientalist angle the pamphlet does turn to the mechanical to explain the alienness of Asian labor, yet bio-orientalism helps to supplement here that what makes this alienness a source for genocidal violence is the way it encompasses the biological threat of foreign life, of an Asian invasive species (Cardozo and Subramaniam 2013).

While London's story constructs Yellow Life as a threat spreading from over there to over here, *Meat vs. Rice* shows the threat of Yellow Life as one already internal to the white body politic—itsself a representation of the boundaries of the national as at one with the male patriarch's—necessitating Yellow Life's elimination through clearer boundaries of ontological life. The report casts allowing any Asian immigration as accepting the "growth of a child with a malignant tumor upon his back" (Gompers and Gutstadt [1902] 1908, 5), revealing Asian life as that malignancy that, while initially hidden, will kill the body politic from within. Constructing Yellow Life as a public health problem, the report focuses on California's Chinatowns as "a singular anomaly...violating every accepted rule of hygiene" (17), discourses around hygiene becoming one way of drawing the boundary between Yellow Life and the white possessive subject whose life is itself bounded from its environment. The report documents Chinese "living literally the life of vermin" (17) by reference to close quarters, lack of sanitation, and the noxious smells of bodies packed tight and opium smoke in the air. This so-called scientific report then veers into the phenomenological, telling the reader to imagine entering the basement of any Chinatown building:

Pick your way by the aid of the policeman's candle along the dark and narrow passageway black and grimy with a quarter of century's accumulation of filth; step with care lest you fall into a cesspool of sewage abominations with which these subterranean depths abound....The air is thick with smoke and fetid with an indescribable odor of reeking vapors. The atmosphere is tangible...they would have slept in the dense and poisonous atmosphere until morning; proof against the baneful effects of the carbonic acid gas generated by this human defiance of chemical laws, and proof against all the symbiotic poisons that would be fatal to a people of any other race in an hour of such surrounding and such conditions. (17)

By depicting Asian life as inherently poisonous, bio-orientalism constructs Yellow Life as a peculiarly animated form of dangerous matter. It is impossible to draw a distinction between Chinese bodies and the repeatedly "tangible" atmosphere they inhabit, both becoming one alien organism that threatens to engulf the (white) reader. By constructing such an alien life, the report can justify its own preferred solution to the problem of Yellow Life in "ethnic" cleansing. These Chinatown conditions have been "obliterated...owing to the great fire" (17), like in London's story one force of destructive nature nullifying noxious Yellow Life. This language of cleansing relies on the relationship between Yellow Life and toxicity, with Asian bodies described as both ontologically different at a chemical level and able to immediately deform any white body through various contacts (Chen 2012; Duong 2018). Describing such contacts, the report relies on evidence that "already a large percentage of the population of the United States have become infected with loathsome disease because of carelessness and indiscriminate association with the Asiatic race" (Gompers and Gutstadt [1902] 1908, 27) through both

sexual intercourse and opium smoking. The outer boundaries of white skin appear to have no resistance to the porosity of Asian life characterized in its very being to move through borders, both national and biological. Asian contact becomes a causal vector of disease for white populations, sapping its inner strength even as threatening its national strength through techno-orientalist dreams of overly productive labor. The report concludes that, because of this Asian vector, “the Coast will never be free from the danger of an incursion of the bubonic plague” until “the Asiatic sections of every city on the Pacific Coast are thoroughly modernized and the inhabitants made to conform to the standards of cleanliness set by Americans” (33). The only suitable outcome here for Yellow Life is to either be cleansed or modernized out of existence.

In both London’s story and *Meat vs. Rice*, Yellow Life mocks any attempts to define life for the white possessive individual. Yellow Life overruns ontological and temporal borders, appearing here as life and there as death, here as the present of fleshy experience and there as the certainty of finitude. Through an attention to bio-orientalism, I want to point out the multiple ways in which Asiatic racial form is constructed as always already out of joint: out of joint temporally, out of joint epistemologically (London on the maze of the Chinese mind), and out of joint ontologically. Yellow Life’s displacement marks it as a threat to the white possessive individual’s attempts to immunize his life, but as London’s depiction of genocide and *Meat vs. Rice* active calls for it shows, ontological difference also justified anti-Asian racism and the need to imagine a white world cleansed of the disease of Yellow Life. While the bio-orientalist discourse at the turn of the century has been exemplary for me so far, bio-orientalism continues to arise in moments of crisis, from America’s Cold War struggles in Asia to contemporary reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ My archive so far has documented American literary and political culture that embrace bio-orientalism’s projection of the self-evident alienness of Yellow Life, yet this is not the only archive of bio-orientalism. I turn now to Bryan Thao Worra’s poetry to show how he both diagnoses the process of bio-orientalist fantasies motivating white violence against Asian bodies, in both Southeast Asia and America, and the alternative archive of Yellow Life he draws upon to depict the potentialities of embracing Yellow Life in all its contagiousness.

Living Yellow Life Otherwise

As bio-orientalism projects a Yellow Life threatening to destroy the white possessive individual subject, practices to immunize white life against Yellow Life create concrete harms to actual Asian bodies. What then would count as a political response to practices of bio-orientalism? One response would be the work that much of Asian American studies has pursued since its inception: the claiming of subjectivity and dismantling of ideologies that imprint the inhumanity of Asian Americans (Okimoto 2014; Lee 2014). Yet today such a move towards humanism risks reinforcing the very possessive individual subjectivity that, as I

have shown, often requires inhuman Yellow Life and Asian death as its horizon of definition, risking Asian Americans adopting the very exclusions towards others that they protest against themselves.⁵ To expand on this, what are the ethico-political implications of multiple forms of life as well, life not as pure matter or bare life but one still attentive to its racializations and imbrication in discourse?⁶

To begin to answer to this question, I read the Laotian American poet Bryan Thao Worra and his innovative poetics as bringing together critiques of American empire, refugee politics, bio-orientalist tropes, and Buddhism. Worra highlights one potential way that leaning into the tropes of Yellow Life may constitute both a critique of the white possessive individual and an imagining otherwise of what counts as life. Worra's collection *Demonstra* specifically engages in a practice of what Michelle Huang (2017) calls, drawing on Karen Barad's work, "ecologies of entanglement," naming "networks of circulation that diffuse the boundaries of the human by foregrounding the relationships between us and the world with which we interact, including the environment" (98). For Worra, his entangled ecologies are not just between the human and the nonhuman world, but draw on traditional horror tropes, Lovecraftian mythos, kaiju movies, and Buddhist cosmology, creating a weird universe that is simultaneously uncanny and home for his refugee speakers. In reading for the entanglement of the human and nonhuman, I also follow Lee (2014) in adopting a lateral method for reading "not to expose a hidden truth but paradoxically to cultivate an openness to the wonders of the aleatory, the chance-event, and the insight of the accidental networked through unacknowledged amphimixis" (26), one that helps me be aware of the aleatory in Worra's strange universe. Lee's (2014) attention to the aleatory also helps show ways, through reading and poetics, to cultivate "hospitable regard" towards otherness as a "retrieved cosmological orientation" (68). I argue that Worra's poetic universe of Buddhist Laotian monsters practices precisely such a cosmological re-orientation for his Laotian American community and readers. In his poetics' sudden encounters between the mundane and the monstrousness, Worra's poems resist speaking from the Human but instead, enacting Lee's call for an orientation to the cosmological, embrace sites of Yellow Life as multiplicity and monstrous becoming, the exact opposite of the genocidal response towards Yellow Life I have so far identified.

In writing *Yellow Life*, Worra rejects the goal of redressing anti-Asian racism by transforming Asian Americans into white possessive subjects, though this does not mean eliding the realities of violence that constitute his Laotian American community. In his "The Last War Poem" Worra (2013) writes that this poem will constitute "the last word for this war / This little side war we were the center of" (43), referring to Laotian Civil War that devastated the country but has rarely received proper recognition. Even as the author knows that "There is no justice from poetry—Any veteran can tell you that," there is an omnipresent "They" demanding that the speaker "'Write'" but "Write what?" (43). This "They" could be veterans from Laos's civil war, current Laotian refugees in America, the ghosts of

the many who died from the war, or the Laotian land and its cosmological pantheon wanting remembrance. These voices demand that the author write “so people won’t forget. So someone will know” that “For every lost limb, let there be a sonnet / To stitch the truth back together” (44). Following Lee’s attention to the Asian American body, there is a more traditional demand here that reparation be a literal stitching back together of a lost body, a body whose integrity represents recovery but also is the mirror of that white possessive subject projecting its own immunity against Asian contagion.

The lost voices demand that the author fulfill his role as an Asian American poet to write as a restorative practice, to bring what has been forgotten into the light of a coherent narrative that can demand redress for the violence of America’s foreign wars. Yet at the end of the poem these voices turn from pleading to accusation, asking directly of the author, “How can you not have words for the war of whispers?” even as the author himself concludes the poem, “that the next time / Will be the last word I write about this damn war” (Worra 2013, 44). On the one hand, there is the implication that the author is not able or willing to perform the act of written redress that, paradoxically, the poem itself stands in for, even as, on the other hand, the author tires from the feeling that he has never stopped writing about the memory of Laos’s civil war. I argue that the conflict within this poem about the author’s need to offer narrative redress helps us understand Worra’s overall rejection in *Demonstra* of narrative redress along the lines of the white possessive individual. Worra rejects the idea that to write and remember the American imperial violence inflicted on Laos means writing its victims as liberal possessive individuals within neat categories of victimhood and loss. Instead, through embracing the multiple cultural, ecological, and cosmological entanglements of Laotian America, Worra both expands what the reader should consider as losses *and* what constitutes Laotian life worth remembering today.

Instead of conventional forms of narrative redress, many of Worra’s poems do not even contain humans at all. He pays attention to bio-orientalist monsters—both those inspired by Laotian Buddhist cosmology and Western B-horror films—finding in them uniquely entangled actors who are closer to freedom and enlightenment than any Human form of life. Worra’s focus on the monstrosity of otherness invites attention to other forms of life that starkly challenge white possessive individualism and the ways that the construction of the monstrosity licenses its destruction in the name of white safety. In “Destroy All Monsters!” Worra mocks the idea of the Human as something sacred and separate from the monsters it destroys. When the orders come to kill the monsters—whether they be Godzilla, migrants, or microbes—the reasoning is that “Humanity must be preserved / At all costs, / Despite a decidedly / Checkered record” (Worra 2013, 135). Here humanity is implicitly one of the white possessive individual who believes “there just isn’t enough space in this vast world” (135) for the dreams of both humans and monsters, resonating with London’s fear of a white world overcrowded by Yellow Life. The author’s voice, a human here rather than a

monster, expresses the concern that “If only we could truly believe you’d be content / On some distant menagerie, / Instead of plotting where to bury you / beyond our sight” (136). Rather than accept a space for the monstrous in relation to the human, Worra’s narrator suggests that behind this aggressive self-defense is the anxiety of monsters who are “Too close a mirror” (135), and perhaps then the desire to exorcize the monstrous that already compromises the immunity of the white possessive self. In Worra’s hands, these racialized figures represent not the horror of difference but become a space for reflecting upon different forms of life, painting different portrayals of belonging, struggle, and resistance in a world where whiteness and its imperialism are scarier than any bio-orientalist contagion.

Worra’s attention to the entanglements of Asian life and the nonhuman resonates with Donna Haraway’s much written about figure of the cyborg, yet whereas Asian Americanist critics note how Haraway’s cyborg refers to such techno-orientalist tropes as the Asian female tech worker, I find that it has less to say about specifically bio-orientalist tropes of Yellow Life (Lowe 1996; Huang 2019). I would raise Worra’s figure of the Zombuddha then as an equally compelling symbol of entanglements with the nonhuman and non-(white) life, as he deploys bio-orientalist tropes to signify different forms of Yellow Life. I am not the first to contrast the zombie with the cyborg as a more properly posthuman horizon of life. In their “A Zombie Manifesto,” Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry (2008) argue that “the only way to truly get posthuman is to become antisubject” (87), with the zombified language of their antisubject strikingly close to bio-orientalist tropes of Yellow Life I have so far identified. Like Kipling’s and London’s depictions of the Chinese, their posthuman zombie is a “consciousless being that is a swarm organism” (Lauro and Embry 2008, 88) threatening the white possessive individual with becoming “a part of the monstrous horde” and revealing “the primal fear of losing the ‘self’” (89). While they draw attention to the zombie’s particular history of racialization in regards to anti-blackness and Caribbean histories, only focusing on that history can obscure the ways that bio-orientalism also codifies Asian bodies as zombie-like and particularly connected to discourses of plague and contagion.⁷ For them the “zombii’s dystopic promise is that it can only assure the destruction of a corrupt system without imagining a replacement” (Lauro and Embry 2008, 96), yet here I would argue that Worra’s deployment of the Zombuddha as a bio-orientalist figure does more than just provide a rupture with the world of the white possessive individual but also begins to map the possibilities and pleasures of Yellow Life lived otherwise.

Providing a different history of the zombie that in recent years increasingly connects to Asia, the bio-orientalism that suffuses *Meat vs. Rice* carries ironic echoes of contemporary fears of the zombie invasion (Ma 2018; Saraf 2019).⁸ In describing Yellow Life as a distinct form of life different from that of the white possessive individual, bio-orientalism emphasizes both the threat to individuality *and* the relentless movement of Yellow Life’s advance. In the terms of the report,

white labor cannot compete with Asian labor because the white laborer would have to “abdicate his individuality” (Gompers and Gutstadt [1902] 1908, 15). While labor here as a conflict between forms of life can be set in the terms of romantic anti-capitalism versus the mechanical coolie body, placed among the tract’s deployment of pathological discourse the emphasis on life becomes key to contrasting the life of the white possessive individual with the threat of Yellow Life. The report casts Yellow Life as a “silent and irresistible flow” (7) that “has marched up to us and already has part possession of one of the fairest of our states” (8) in already seizing California. Anticipating the zombie horde, Yellow bodies in mass march—Kipling’s “The March of the Mongol”—ceaselessly across the Pacific to threaten the American homeland. Bio-orientalist fears of the Asian horde in *Meat vs. Rice* anticipates contemporary revivals of zombies as the fear of de-individuation, that Yellow Life will rupture and erase—from within or without—the bounded life of the white possessive individual.

Worra’s creation of the Zombuddha does not lend itself, however, to representing either the pure de-individuation of a zombie horde or the mindlessness of a single zombie; instead, it turns these tropes to the end of depicting a different kind of life, one in tune with Lee’s cosmological orientation. First, his Zombuddha is not just entangled with Western horror films’ and the zombie’s African and Caribbean history, but a completely new relationship as well to Laos’s Buddhist cosmology. By toggling between whether such a creature should be called a “*Zomphi*” (Worra 2013, 47) or a “*Phi Zom*,” Worra raises the ambiguity of whether this is a zombie transformed from a formerly living Laotian body or a uniquely Laotian version of the living dead, and thus what exactly is foreign about the zombie here. Worra’s speaker asserts that “it is not wholly implausible / To imagine a leathery Lao zombie, / Loathsome and lonely, / Estranged from home” (46). Even a zombie in Worra’s universe can suffer loneliness and estrangement, trapped in a strange land far from home and transformed into a monster for the needs of a white audience. In the poem “Zombuddha,” Worra playfully, but not without reason, raises the status of the zombie to an enlightened buddha, transforming a racialized symbol of enslavement and ultimate loss into one of ultimate peace with the world. This Zombuddha “utters, ‘Om,’ not ‘Brains’” and “Is not attached to the body / Is not attached to the mind” (37). It resists war and violence and “Is beyond the vices of lust and greed”; even if you attempt to “Burn him. Cut him. Shoot him. Flee him,” he “accepts every moment with equanimity” (37). While in contemporary film, the zombie appears as the harbinger of violence, often initially from Asia now, Worra’s Zombuddha “Does not hurry, or drive cars or trucks. / Or tanks or gunships or warplanes” (37). Referencing America’s imperial warfare in Southeast Asia, the Zombuddha transforms the object of fear that usually calls racist warfare against it into a symbol of peace. Yet the Zombuddha in its enlightenment also still recalls the loss of other forms of life. For it “Not one possession of the past matters. / Old names are useless” (37). Not clearly Laotian or now American, the Zombuddha names the continuing entanglements of Laotian religion, American warfare, racialized fears, and contemporary media.

Worra ironically offers his Zombuddha as one model for the freedom of life-in-death, proposing the Zombuddha's actions as the "lessons of an uncertain universe" (Worra 2013, 38) that could be brought into focus by the radical disruptions of climate change or of imperialist bombings and invasions. Yet in this poem, as in *Demonstra* as a whole, there remains the recognition that the violence of the white possessive individual can still shut down these possibilities of other kinds of life; whereas some will aim to "Become one with him" the speaker states bluntly—in a line separated by spaces from the other lines—"You will destroy him to be comfortable" (38), calling out both the white possessive reader and the white possessiveness inside any possible reader of the poem. Still the Zombuddha will "'Keep going, '...in his own way'" (38), implying a persistence to the endless shuffle of the zombie that is not the persistent labor of the capitalist body or the invasion of the Asian horde that must not be allowed to enter America, but of a Yellow Life that continues to be even as it is continuously denied and destroyed.

Could the Zombuddha, and Worra's many other enlightened monsters be a model for Asian Americanist critique in response to bio-orientalism? These monsters practice a certain ethics of openness to the plurality of things in the world, or even outside it, yet also open themselves up to forces often equally terrible and violent (such as divine beings, mythological monsters, or the American military-industrial complex). On openness, Reza Negarestani (2003) writes, "'I am open to you' means, I have the capacity to bear your investment or 'I afford you'...if you exceed this capacity I will be cracked, lacerated and laid open" (56). Negarestani critiques a liberal openness that would consolidate the Other in the Same through affordance with a radical openness that he himself often expresses through violent language (see also Halberstam 2020).⁹ The Zombuddha's willingness to be cracked open by otherness formulates a critique of the white possessive individual's immunized response to Yellow Life. Rather than putting up new walls to protect from the spread of Yellow Life or genocidal imaginations of its elimination, an ethics of care that goes beyond mere affordance would be a willingness and capacity to accept and being transformed by Yellow Life in all its manifestations. Yet this embrace of openness is not without its ambivalences, for as in the desire for herd immunity to protect from COVID-19, racialized bodies' openness to contagion can be refashioned as another reason for their disposability, still centering the white possessive individual as the population most in need of protection.

Worra's Zombuddha and its paradoxical freedom found in abandoning the cravings of life for life-in-death, for a different form of life that may not appear much like life at all charts one response to the challenges of living in the age of COVID-19. Bio-orientalism continues to imagine Yellow Life as the existential threat to the flourishing of possessive individual life. In the stark increase in anti-Asian hate crimes attributed to COVID-19 as the "Wuhan virus," Asian American politics and ethics cannot escape bio-orientalism's role in crafting Yellow Life as

threat and scapegoat to the continued flourishing of all (white) forms of life on Earth. Rather than shoring up the life of the Human by disavowing Yellow Life, I have argued that Asian American studies could seriously imagine Yellow Life otherwise through greater attention to its bio-orientalist depictions. While this marks a turn away from the historical focus of Asian American politics and entails its own risks of which actual bodies get included and excluded, I agree with Rachel C. Lee that continuing to ignore different ontologies of life imposes its own limits on the imagination and goals of ethnic studies writ large. If the white possessive individual marks himself by his obsessive protection and immunization of his self as property, and indeed at his extreme can only imagine the world outside of himself as a source of property or peril, then what is truly to be lost by abandoning him to his life for all the lives that do not appear in his orbit?

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Notes

¹ While I do not mean to engage extensively here with Sylvia Wynter's work, by the Human I do point to her work on how the Western white male subject comes to stand in for the definition of the Human itself (McKittrick 2015).

² For example, Michelle Huang's (2019) excellent overview of post-humanism in Asian American literature still turns to techno-orientalist tropes and images, despite the long history of biological fear in Yellow Peril discourse. For interventions on the topic of Asian American studies and environmental humanities, see Cardozo and Subramaniam (2013); Tran (2018); Shomura (2020).

³ On horror as a political genre encapsulating white fears and meant to invoke the need for a response, see Anker (2014).

⁴ For example, President Eisenhower echoes Kipling and London in thinking that "no matter what differences in culture and tradition, values or language, the Russian leaders were human beings, and they wanted to remain alive," while "the Chinese...were different, often fanatical, irrational, and caring little or nothing for human life. 'We are always wrong when we believe that Orientals think logically as we do'" (Peck 2006, 5).

⁵ For example, debates between Asian Americans and African Americans over issues from policing to affirmative action often hinge on the question of whether struggles for Asian American goals come at a detriment to African Americans (Kim 2016, 2018).

⁶ What would it mean here to pursue Kandice Chuh's argument for Asian American studies as a subjectless discourse, to imagine otherwise subjectlessness as not just the deconstruction of the subject within the symbolic order of language but as also referring, as Lee has shown, to the deconstruction of the subject as a bounded form of life by recognizing the instability and transience of life itself? Chuh (2003) argues that to imagine otherwise does not merely mean shifting perspectives but requires "undoing the very notion of common objectivity itself and about recognizing the ethicopolitical implications of multiple epistemologies" (x).

⁷ For the zombie's history in the Haitian Revolution, see Dayan (1996). For extensive surveys of its contemporary cultural importance, see Lauro (2015, 2017); Fishel and Wilcox (2017); Dillon (2019).

⁸ For other examples, in Max Brooks's *World War Z* the origins of its zombie-creating virus are in China (the book) and in India (the movie), while the popularity of recent South Korean zombie media *Train to Busan*, *Kingdom*, *Peninsula*, and *#Alive* point to the displacement of the zombie horde to Asia itself and a threat to its newly emergent middle class, modeling itself on Western possessive individualism.

⁹ Negarestani also helps connect this conception of what elsewhere he calls Cthulhoid ethics to the construction of Yellow Life as microscopic. He writes, "Through the expanse of philia, everything should participate and participation has no end, nor beginning, nor horizon, nor certain objective of participation. Infested by the epidemic (contagious and wasteful) bonds of philia, openness is triggered on all levels of its communicative lines but more on the plane of 'being opened' than 'being open' or 'being open to'" (Negarestani 2003, 63).

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