

Floating Currencies and “Colliding Worlds”: Postcolonial Capitalism, Queer Diaspora, and Multicultural Recognition in *Gold by the Inch* Travis Sands

Abstract: This article addresses queer subjectivities produced under postcolonial capitalism. In a context in which economic value is virtualized via currency floats, high-volume trading, and other financial practices, subjectivity is likewise virtualized such that sexual, racial, gender, and ethno-national differences come to be framed as interchangeable and persistently in motion. Putting theories of postcolonial capitalism in conversation with queer diasporic critique, I read Lawrence Chua’s novel *Gold by the Inch* (1998) as an ambivalent engagement with the sexual and racial logics specific to Southeast Asian multiculturalism. Focusing on Chua’s extensive use of second-person narration and the ethical ambiguity of the novel’s unnamed protagonist, I argue that multicultural recognition—a process of mutual valorization of cultural differences amongst those seen as equals—in postcolonial Southeast Asia commensurates the increasingly proximate but not identical subjectivities of those working for capitalist accumulation and those who have been rendered part of a permanently surplus population. Such commensuration effaces the raced, gendered, and sexualized modes of domination required to sustain this surplus population in perpetuity. In contrast, my reading of *Gold by the Inch* emphasizes the non-identity of queer postcolonial subjectivities that mark ruptures in postcolonial capitalism’s governance of heterogeneity.

Keywords: Lawrence Chua, postcolonial capitalism, queer diaspora, multiculturalism, value

When encountering a dark-skinned “burly Lao guy” being “serviced” by “some little light-skinned queen” in the bushes of Bangkok’s Lumpini Park (Chua 175), the unnamed narrator of Lawrence Chua’s novel *Gold by the Inch* (1998) is “transfixed” by the man’s emotional and erotic detachment even as the queen is “really getting into it” (175, 176). As the narrator and the man in the park “regard each other with the skeptical detachment of consumers in Foodland,” the narrator observes how “[u]nder this sky, we are neither hetero- nor homosexual. We are just smart shoppers” (176). While it appears that this observation is similar to the narrator’s claims elsewhere in the novel about the production of bodies as “prospects” and “merchandise” in postcolonial sexual economies (18, 63), it is far more than a lament over capitalism’s commodification of everything or a jeremiad against sex tourism in Southeast Asia. Rather, his comment marks the insufficiency of Anglo-American categories of racial and sexual identity in accounting for the multicultural histories and subjectivities specific to the region. That is, when spatialized to “this sky” and Bangkok’s sexual economy, Western configurations of sexual identity (hetero- and homosexual) come unmoored from their referents.

This moment of recognition between the two characters is not one of politically calcified “out” gay masculinities, and the sexual public temporarily produced in this exchange is not that of gay male community.¹ Instead, this scene highlights the metastability of both racial and sexual subjectivities in multicultural Southeast Asia that Chua emphasizes throughout the novel. The characters’ subjectivities are, like the flow of global currency markets, metastable in the sense that they are “stable only long enough to enable transactions to occur and [change with subsequent] transactions” (Cetina and Preda 116). While Anglo-American multiculturalisms take the differential incorporation of racialized and sexualized subjects into the body politic as a sign of both liberal modernity and also the non-modernity of the postcolonies, Southeast Asian multiculturalisms are the result of much longer histories of Asian migration. In the latter, subjects persistently renegotiate their differences and heterogeneity in ways that do not easily resolve into liberal identity categories. As “smart shoppers” (Chua 176), the narrator and the man in

the park are maximizing value in this dynamic environment. They recognize one another not because they occupy similar identity categories such as gay or Asian but because of the specific way that transnational movements, racialized sexual desires, and local economies have situated them in place and time.

The narrator gives similar accounts of other sexual encounters as he returns to Southeast Asia in the mid-1990s following his father’s death and his breakup with Jim, his bourgeois white lover. Organized in three sections that juxtapose vignettes and prose fragments that oscillate between first- and second-person narration, *Gold* loosely coheres around geographic markers: the first and last sections are set primarily in Bangkok’s hotels and gay bars, and the middle section is set in the Malaysian and Singaporean homes of the narrator’s extended family, whose patriarchs first arrived in Singapore as Teochew coolie laborers. Value and equivalence serve as central themes as the narrator unsuccessfully disarticulates the economic contours of his relationship with Thong, a Bangkok call-boy, from what he hopes to be a relationship founded on love and unmediated by the market. The narrative grows increasingly disjointed as it seems to buckle under the pressure of multiple, non-analogous histories until, in the final section, the narrator returns from Penang to Bangkok where he acknowledges that his relationship with Thong has come to an end; the narrator also learns that what he understood to be love was merely an affective form of capital—a market intimacy organized by the circuits of gay globality.

In this article, I read *Gold* as a record of how multicultural recognition, which I define as a process of mutual valorization of cultural differences amongst those seen as equals, reveals postcolonial capital as dependent on conditions outside itself, despite its avowal to the contrary. By this I mean that multicultural recognition hides non-capitalist social and economic forms, those typically associated with the informal economy, that capital requires for its existence. These forms reveal the non-universality and incoherence of a purportedly self-sufficient, all-encompassing system. In its contemporary form, multicultural recognition allows postcolonial capitalism to circulate with increasing velocity by commensurating temporally and geographically specific histories and

subjectivities; it contradictorily bolsters postcolonial forms of exploitation and domination even while nominally producing relationships bracketed from the forms of value and devaluation that structure postcolonial capitalism. In *Gold*, multicultural recognition, in conjunction with the supplementary discourses of love and queer kinship, promises equality while masking the ever-proliferating violence underwriting the production of permanently surplus populations in postcolonial Southeast Asia.²

Published in the midst of the Asian debt crisis, *Gold* gives an account of Thailand's speculative real estate boom and the attendant cultural and economic logics that led to the 1997 financial collapse. In response to this crisis, Thailand shifted its currency from a fixed exchange rate pegged to the US dollar to a floating exchange rate subject to the vagaries of the global currency market.³ As an effect of virtualization, "there is no longer a fixed scale that measures value" (Hardt and Negri 356), making the value of floating currencies "maximally abstract yet real" (Massumi 58). This virtualized value, typically associated with the financialization of capital, is produced through the persistent circulation of currencies unmoored from commodity production and fixed relations with other currencies. That is, the value of floating currency is produced in a "place where time gains the upper hand over space, where relations start to matter more than mere things, [and where] power's location is less important than its velocity through temporary obstacles" (Chua 24). While, as Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee note, the "circulation systems" of global capitalism are leading to significant cultural transformations (10), many theorists insist that these transformations do not result in a homogenous culture of global capitalism (Lowe and Lloyd 1). Rather, cultural transformation is marked by locally specific incorporations of globalizing processes differentiated by heterogeneous scales, sites, and histories (Mezzadra 1).

Furthermore, such cultural transformation is not merely a byproduct of economic determinants. Economic and cultural values constitute each other such that cultural difference is foundational in the production of capitalist value (Spivak 229) and is thus inseparable from the economy (Lowe and Lloyd 1). Chua's narrator gestures to this relation-

ship when he states, “Economists explain how production takes place in relations between classes of people. But they never explain how those relationships evolve in the first place” (57). Using cultural forms to show how global capitalism produces economic value through the social production of “restrictive particularity” (Lowe 27)—that is, differences produced to foreclose access to citizenship, higher-wage labor, and so on—queer diasporic critique offers a frame for understanding how labor power is devalued or rendered surplus in and through evolving particularities of sexual, racial, gender, and national difference. In a queer diasporic framework, culture indexes heterogeneity in the putatively homogenous domain of global capitalism. This heterogeneity marks not only the differential racialization of distinct populations (Hong and Ferguson 3) but also the “differential relationships” in nominally homogenous racialized populations (Lowe 67). To put this in the narrator’s terms, queer diasporic critique—and, by extension, the queer of color critical project it contributes to—puts into relief non-heteronormative sexualities to explain how differential relationships, those where power is unequally distributed, “evolve in the first place” (Chua 57).

I draw on queer diasporic critique not to emphasize how postcolonial capitalism “short circuits the politics of queer diaspora” but rather to emphasize the queer diasporic politics of postcolonial capitalism (Eng et al. 10). In this account, queerness is politically ambiguous. The partiality, non-identity, and subjectlessness of queer, as a term with “no fixed political referent” (1), can as easily be the means of social regulation as of radical possibility. Thus, rather than excavate the potential of “unauthorized” subjectivities purportedly “beyond” capitalist political and economic formations, as David Eng suggests (*Feeling* 15), I use queer diasporic critique as a means of identifying ruptures in postcolonial capital’s negotiation of heterogeneity.

Multicultural recognition is a technique of virtualization that produces cultural value by rendering sexual, racial, gender, and ethno-national differences as substitutable and persistently in motion. It frames one order of difference in terms of another, compressing temporalities and geographies. As Brian Massumi explains, the virtual is a realm of potential where things “happen too quickly to have happened, actu-

ally,” where “futurity combines, unmediated, with pastness,” and “where outsides are infolded” (30). As such, the virtual is both materially embedded and beyond materiality, historical yet outside of time. With their values produced in dynamic relation, socio-cultural differences are floating currencies that mediate social exchange such that the racialized, sexualized, and gendered subjectivities posited by postcolonial capitalism are virtualized by dint of the way those differences are framed as if they are the same. When read as a queer diasporic critique of postcolonial itineraries of multicultural recognition and the cultural forms that naturalize them, *Gold* offers a frame for understanding how this virtual equivalence “is a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect” (Massumi 30) while nominal similarities of sexuality, race, and labor mark dispersal and disjunction.

I. Toward a Queer Diasporic Critique of Postcolonial Capitalism

In contradistinction to neocolonial travel narratives, *Gold* highlights the protocols of multicultural recognition that underwrite postcolonial capitalist governmental regimes while disrupting facile literary tropes involving encounters between cosmopolitan citizens and postcolonial subjects. As Chih-ming Wang notes, *Gold* also displaces multiculturalism as a sign of Euro-American liberal modernity and instead locates it as “an organic formation” of local Southeast Asian histories and “everyday practice” (20). Throughout the novel, the narrator deploys tropes of identity (e.g., gay hustler, hypereroticized Asian, returning son) in hope that his various performances of sexuality, race, kinship, and class will set in motion forms of recognition to provide him with a sense of wholeness. Yet these performances of organic, geographically delimited identities fail to achieve their desired effects, leaving the narrator with a feeling of fragmentation.

Chua thematizes this failure in the middle section of the novel where the narrator reflects on his family’s diasporic histories while desiring a homecoming that never materializes. In these chapters, the narrator travels to Penang seeking stories of his origins, which he associates with his grandmother whom he did not know and whose death has been explained to him in “a million stories,” each attributed to a multitude

of causes ranging from anti-imperial resistance to marital infidelity and domestic violence (Chua 109). While looking through a box of portraits at a roadside antique stand, the narrator finds a picture of a Nyonya (a Malaysian woman of Chinese descent) whom he addresses as “you,” who “could be any grandmother” but with “a shape to [her] face . . . that reminds [him] of [his] own face in the mirror” (107). The slippage between the specific “you” of his grandmother and that of a generic grandmother marks the Nyonya as a general particular—paradoxically both a specific someone and a generic anyone who is recognizable to the narrator only because of shared bodily traits. After removing the picture from its antique frame, the narrator turns it over to find that it is actually a postcard, and the Nyonya was “a sales pitch” and “hot tropical fantasy” (109). His search for family origins in surrogate images highlights the fundamental inaccessibility of such origins while linking his quest to the colonial traffic in bodies and artifacts. Like the German tourists he sees at the antique stall, the narrator turns to the market to access history and, like the colonial traveler, marks his desire to mistake the postcard image for the real.

Reflecting on his time in Penang and the futility of this search for a definitive family narrative, the narrator claims:

I was wrong after all. There are no stories here. Only the images left from the stories. The stains on the mattress of history. . . . Even as your body becomes legible, the illegible Nyonya that you are is vanishing at the seams of the image. Your culture is a relic of antiquity. The only thing that remains is tradition. A dance without meaning. Keep this photograph. The sum of your blood quantum. Siamese, Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka, Acehnese, Tamil, Sinhalese, Portuguese. All those things inside you. You. A matrix. Pregnant with inconsistencies and catastrophes, delusions and discoveries. Dreams of colliding worlds. (113)

The image of the Nyonya renders her body legible as a sign of cultural difference generated out of Penang’s multicultural history rooted in centuries of inter-ethnic exchange. But as a sign of a cultural “dance

without meaning,” the image connotes a multiculturalism denuded of historical and material specificity (i.e., removed from its frame). That is, the Nyonya represents an abstract Southeast Asian multiculturalism and not the multicultural histories of Southeast Asia that the narrator reads in her “blood quantum.” Put differently, the narrator’s interpretation of the Nyonya marks the intercalation of an emergent multicultural form of postcolonial governance with a historical, organic multiculturalism; the Nyonya image is a visual marker of the catachrestic relationship of the former to the latter. As Jacques Derrida notes of catachresis generally, this relationship is characterized by “the imposition of a sign upon a meaning which did not yet have its own proper sign in language. So much so that there is no substitution here, no transport of proper signs, but rather the irruptive extension of a sign proper to an idea” (*Margins* 255). After realizing that the photo is actually a postcard, the narrator becomes aware that the image of the Nyonya is just an aggregate of imposed meanings, none of which bring him closer to his grandmother or the specific woman represented.

While Wang astutely reads the Nyonya’s hybridized blood quantum as an effect of “a multicultural lineage which stretches from Penang to Siam and shoots off to several ethnic villages in China and the region, all embedded in the gloomy groves of empires, East and West” (26), he curiously interprets this passage and the novel more broadly as articulating a liberatory “vision of multiculturalism from below as the history of the vanquished[,] . . . unbridled by the past and open to the future” (30). For Wang, the “dreams of colliding worlds” (Chua 113) “rekindle” memories elided by official history (Wang 30). However, I read these dreams as effects of the “lived paradox” of the virtual which, as Massumi contends, compresses pasts and futures, thereby eclipsing the present and rendering it unrepresentable (30). By using the term “matrix” (Chua 113), which carries dual meanings as both an originating source and a network of interconnected elements, the narrator paradoxically stages the Nyonya as both root and rhizome. The inconsistencies, catastrophes, delusions, and discoveries that make up the narrator’s “dreams of colliding worlds” make the Nyonya multiple and, by extension, persistently disrupt the narrator’s search for home. Rather than a counterhistory of

the vanquished, the Nyonya represents a historical rupture that leaves the narrator “at the end of a pilgrimage, knowing . . . that there is nothing left to claim. There is no prepackage of identity or ethnic heritage left to possess. No folk tales passed on from Grandmother’s knee. No warm flavors of home pathetically re-created on the other side of the planet. Nothing” (135). The “nothing” that the narrator finds in place of home marks both the failure of ethnic identification that constitutes multicultural recognition and the critical limitations of Eng’s theory of queer diaspora that defines it as “a concept providing new methods of contesting traditional communities based not on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments” (“Transnational Adoption” 4). Even with its emphasis on arrival and affiliation, Eng’s definition of queer diaspora delimits space to the extent that the definition cannot account for how home gets produced by the “diasporic imaginary” in the interval between here and there (Axel 411), neither restricted to spaces of departure nor arrival. That is, home does not produce diaspora but rather is produced by it; home is persistently reproduced and “reprocessed”—a term borrowed from Anne-Marie Fortier that references the ways that diasporic subjects “continually reimagine” home according to the material contingencies of the moment (116).⁴ In this understanding, the diasporic home is an internally heterogeneous, shifting formation constituted at the intersection of non-analogous intimacies, affectivities, and temporalities.

Against romantic notions of queer diaspora that mark home as an effect of recognition in otherwise hostile political, cultural, and economic contexts, Chua offers a more ambivalent understanding that emphasizes difference and dispersal. While metaphors of dispersal are often anchored in either a lost or yet-to-be-completed sense of wholeness, they can also mark irreducible heterogeneities that cannot add up to a totalized, unitary narrative. *Gold’s* narrator, in fact, often reverses metaphors of dispersal previously used to mark affiliation in order to mark dissolution, non-unity, non-identity, and non-recognition. For instance, while watching Thong sleep one night, the narrator reflects, “I was suddenly overcome with fear as I realized you, whom I’d thought

my twin, were nothing like me” (Chua 37). This fear comes from his sense that their “differences seemed so wide in that moment” that they “would never be bridged” (37). Lying there, he claims: “I felt my body dissolve into a million tiny ants, and as I hoped they would climb inside your head, devour your dreams, and bring them back to me, they defied me, growing wings and scattering across the million different points of the compass” (37). Those differences that the narrator previously understood to indicate his similarity to Thong return in this instance to mark absence and opacity. His desire to penetrate Thong’s interiority is thwarted by a figurative body that refuses organic wholeness. This passage thus serves as an allegory for how queer diaspora, rather than being the abstract domain of equivalence between subjects with different but overlapping histories, names the fundamental differences inherent to a putatively homogeneous population.

Contrary to epistemologies of diaspora that operate abstractly and ground identity claims in a history of dispersal, the narrator’s comment becomes an “anti-abstraction” (Edwards 63). That is, it marks diaspora not as a domain of abstract sameness but of unbridgeable difference. This difference gives the lie to how even difference-based models of sociality like multicultural recognition work as technologies of commensuration. In *Gold*, Chua figures diaspora as *décalage*—a “haunting gap or discrepancy at the center of any articulated conjuncture [that] marks the radical incommensurability of components otherwise understood as organic in their relationship” (Edwards 64). These discrepancies pressure the limits of theories of queer diaspora that emphasize affiliation between “unauthorized subjects” (Eng, *Feeling* 14) because such theories presume, at the least, situationally stable subjectivities and volitional subjects whose practices of recognition shore up the very conditions that produce diaspora and their place in it.

The kind of queer diasporic critique that Chua offers in *Gold* does not envision the restoration of order in the face of postcolonial capital’s disorganizing effects or long for the consolidation of a coherent community. Rather, it offers a rich frame for assessing the modes through which multiple differences are made to cohere as if equivalent while simultaneously emphasizing the impossibility of such equivalence. Chua’s novel

both requires and disciplines a queer of color critical practice specific to the virtualized subjectivities produced in diasporic postcolonial contexts.

Of the handful of scholars who have written about *Gold*, most have read it as an account of the neocolonial intrusion of US capitalism in Southeast Asia. Youngsuk Chae, for instance, argues that “the text clearly delineates a resistance against globalizing capitalism and U.S. neocolonialist economic domination of Southeast Asia” (752), while Stephen Hong Sohn reads the narrator as a “political pundit of colonialism who engages in spreading capitalist influence” (117). Such accounts are somewhat perfunctory in their critiques of contemporary capitalism and freely substitute the terms neocolonial, postcolonial, transnational, global, and imperial when describing economic relations in the novel, thus glossing over the specificity of both the diasporic and postcolonial context that I understand Chua to be emphasizing. As an alternative to such readings, I synthesize Kalyan Sanyal’s theory of postcolonial capital and Roderick Ferguson’s queer of color critique to offer a framework for addressing this diasporic postcolonial context without conflating various geographic and politico-economic scales.

In *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, Sanyal claims that postcolonial capitalism is distinct from transnational or global capitalism because of the specific role primitive accumulation plays in postcolonial development. Rather than a process that subsumes pre-capital, postcolonial capitalist development produces pre-capital such that pre-capital is not outside of but rather an “internal ‘other’ of capital” (39). Sanyal thus redesignates pre-capital as “non-capital” to mark its immanence to capital (39). Given the immanence of non-capital, postcolonial capitalism is inherently heterogeneous (composed of capital and non-capital), and its surplus populations are permanently excluded because concurrence forecloses those populations’ incorporation.⁵ In the case of Thailand, Sanyal’s theory applies not only to those places that had been formally colonized but also to any capitalist formation characterized by what he calls a reversal of primitive accumulation, by which he means the return of surplus capital to the nominally pre-capitalist labor power (59).

To manage this permanently excluded population, capitalist development—historically mobilized to incorporate surplus populations—ac-

tivates a process whereby surplus “is not transformed into new capital but transferred to the surplus population to constitute the conditions of existence of non-capitalist production” (Sanyal 59). According to Sanyal, the goal of postcolonial development is to “rehabilitate” and politically manage the dispossessed into informal, non-capitalist modes of production by providing them access to productive resources (127). The power of the postcolonial economic order “lies in its ability, not to annihilate its ‘others’, but to negotiate the world of difference” (8). It is a complex hegemonic form “in which dominance expresses itself through difference rather than monism” (207). This negotiation of difference involves the production of new subjects and subjectivities that appear to take the same form as those produced under capital but that have different ends. The subjectivities produced within (oriented to accumulation) and outside (oriented to consumption) of capital are thus uncannily proximate but non-identical (127). To maintain this uncanny proximity, multicultural recognition functions as a virtualizing mode of postcolonial governance deployed to hail these subjects as if they were equal partners in cultural exchange, thereby masking the raced, gendered, and sexualized modes of domination needed to produce and maintain the surplus population in perpetuity.

Sanyal’s critique of postcolonial capitalism, when combined with queer of color critique, offers a framework for understanding the heterogeneities of sexuality, gender, and race specific to the postcolonial context represented in *Gold*.⁶ Ferguson asserts that queer of color analysis provides a frame for understanding how capitalism “produces emergent social formations that exceed the racialized boundaries of gender and sexual ideals” (11) and how “gender and sexuality variegate racial formations” (19). Ferguson also offers a framework for understanding the “floating character” (Sanyal 217) of new subjectivities produced concomitantly in postcolonial formal (accumulation) and informal (need) economies—subjectivities whose production Sanyal notes but never formally explores. Equally important, queer of color critique uses cultural forms like novels to “bear witness to the critical gender and sexual heterogeneity that comprises minority cultures” and “shed light on the ruptural components of culture” (Ferguson 24). In *Gold*, these ruptures

are the “dreams of colliding worlds” (Chua 113), the *décalages* of diaspora that unsettle the virtualizing effects of multicultural recognition, suspend the circulation of cultural currencies floating between formal and informal postcolonial economies, and show that postcolonial capitalism is neither internally coherent nor self-sustaining.

II. Multicultural Recognition and the “Chains of Vicarious Investment”

Gold is informed by the non- and more-than-state-based multiculturalisms that have resulted from multiple, overlapping histories of migration in Southeast Asia. In the postcolonial context, multicultural recognition is a strategy deployed to link, and thus temporarily resolve, the contradictions between the subjects of capital and the denizens of its wastelands. As Elizabeth Povinelli notes, under multiculturalism “the conditions of livability for minority and subaltern people [still] depends on the colonized subject’s ability to mimic a purified and abstracted form, but this time [that form is] his or her cultural past. ‘You be (traditionally) yourself.’ ‘Be yourself (traditionally)’” (*Cunning* 6). The implicit command is that you must be cultural like everyone else.⁷ Culture is what comes to define the “you,” and you are only you to the extent that you perform culture. This is precisely the dynamic that Sanyal targets in his critique of the “valorization of indigenusness” as a mode of oppression that frames the indigenous subject as residing in an “authentic space” outside of capital (93). It is also the dynamic at work in the narrator’s framing of the Nyonya’s culture as a “dance without meaning” (Chua 113).

For the narrator, this valorization of indigenusness involves an entanglement of auto- and allo-identification whose paths, as Eve Sedgwick notes, are “strange and recalcitrant” because “to identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identification *with*” (61; emphasis in original). The process of identification is thus “fraught” because it is always partial and involves the counteridentification “*as against*” (61; emphasis in original). Building on Sedgwick’s analysis, José Esteban Muñoz notes that this process is exceptionally fraught for queer of color subjects “who are hailed by more than one minority identity component” (8). For such

multiply marginalized subjects, the twinned process of allo- and auto-identification involve “projective chains of vicarious investment” in the subjectivities, cultural practices, and affects of other marginalized subjects (Sedgwick 62). As with floating currencies whose value is expressed only in the form of ever-shifting others, the vicarious investments of the self in others mark entry to the virtual such that distinctions between the two fold in on one another.⁸

In *Gold*, the queer diasporic narrator’s predominant use of the second person provides a formal staging of such chains of vicarious investment.⁹ The three opening episodes, for instance, are addressed to a “you” who thinks that “there are no seasons” in Thailand and who desires to hear a story of a transcendent intimacy unsullied by the machinations of sexual capitalism and the market for bodies (Chua 6). The narrator observes:

He’s a hustler. A hooker as opposed to a whore. You know the difference, right? Just because you give a blow job in a phone booth doesn’t make you a call girl. . . . Do you want to hear that we met at a disco and he left his john alone to come stand next to me. That later, after the introductions were done, we went back to my hotel room and brushed our lips against each other. That it was the purest kiss I can remember, transcendent of our roles that night. That I wanted to see him naked but could only get my eyes halfway open. That we kissed and necked for at least two hours and fell asleep hard. That the next day I gave him money, but he wouldn’t accept it. (7)

The narrator counteridentifies with this “you” by rehearsing the protocols of a neocolonial fantasy that removes sexual intimacy from the conditions of the market. He performatively summons the reader by providing the narrative desires that organize what Neferti Tadiar calls neocolonial “fantasy-production,” which suggests his distance from that reader by his ability to discern—and therefore demystify—readerly expectations.¹⁰ The narrator is figuring himself in contrast to the Gay International that, as many argue, has globalized consumer-driven understandings of sexual identity.¹¹

However, this passage stands in stark contradiction to Thong’s claim in the final pages of the novel that the narrator’s time in Thailand is “just a vacation,” as well as to the narrator’s self-assessment that “in the end, you are just an American darker than the rest, doing things in Thailand you can never do at home” (Chua 201). Here the narrator refers to himself in the second person, linking himself to the you of the Gay International—a you that, in the last instance, is a sex tourist on the global circuit. Read against the opening episodes, the narrator’s comment suggests that his understanding of the protocols of neo-colonial fantasy-production come not from being the racialized object of the neocolonial gaze (as sex worker) but rather from being the subject of neo-colonial modes of recognition (as American tourist on an erotic adventure). The narrator’s repeated deployment of this self-referential you when speculating on his relationships with Thong and his own family in Singapore marks a fundamental incongruence between their lives and his, as well as a desire to use them as opportunities for self-definition.

Another mode of second-person address in the novel is symptomatic of the virtualizing effects of multicultural recognition in the production of postcolonial subjectivity, one in which the narrator addresses himself to Thong, often in direct conversation with him or in fragmentary internal monologues that mediate the other two modes of second-person address. The narrator uses this third form of “you” to mark racial, sexual, and economic identification with Thong. For example, he claims early in the novel that “you and I took our first breath with the ashes of napalm in our mouths” (30). In this narrative of origins, the protagonist identifies with Thong through a shared experience of US imperialist aggression in Southeast Asia. Indeed, the narrator is at moments so convinced of their commonality that he insists they can “pass for brothers” (27) and are “perfect lovers” living as “two identical clocks side by side ticking time in perfect harmony” (29). These passages point to an imagining of time as homogeneous and of their lives as coincident in spite of their ethnic differences and their families’ different histories of migration. The second-person narration here marks a vicarious investment that compresses intimacy with identity and, in so doing, flattens the distinction between their uneven histories.

The narrator often slips in and out of each of these three different modes of second-person address, sometimes to the extent that the pronoun “you” loses its referent to become free-floating in its signification: “Here’s what I want you to do. This is the costume I want you to wear. This is what I’m into. My thing. You know. You are young, driven by poverty like every generation to do this. But you’ve fallen in love with me. We have so much in common” (15). This fragment immediately follows an account of the narrator’s first sexual encounter, with a white businessman in the bathroom of a New York commuter train—an account that interrupts the narrator’s description of the first time he took Thong home. Because of the intercalation of these different narratives, the “you” loses its referent—it could index either the narrator or Thong, thus situating the addressor as either the businessman or the narrator. The pronoun introduces an ambivalence that locates the narrator as either/both the object and subject of address. Neither here nor there, “you” circulates between the businessman, the narrator, and Thong, rendering their grammatical positions equivalent even though the narrator has provided enough context for readers to maintain a sense of their individual differences. I thus read this floating “you” as marking not only the narrator’s difficulty with keeping his narratives straight but also Chua’s concerns with the links between language, recognition, and value. It is not that the referent “you” simply marks the transition from a particular to a general: it marks an ongoing circulation between these poles. In short, Chau’s use of “you” is the floating currency in inter-subjective exchange. Chua’s grammatical play is not merely a willy-nilly form of postmodern indeterminacy but rather a formal staging of how multicultural recognition figures a social field in which I (as the recognizing subject) am always already understood to be you (the recognized), and where you always constitute a part of what I am. In *Gold*, multicultural recognition frames the social as a field of vicarious substitutability, which as such is counter-intuitively evacuated of its intersubjective foundation to the extent that it functions as a domain of self-elaboration.

According to critics like Judith Butler and Patchen Markell, when I recognize you, I am always also addressing myself. Through logics of substitution and commensuration, recognition returns myself to me

through my recognition of you; recognition centers the self at the very moment that it signals an orientation to the other. In *Gold*, Chua persistently figures direct address to the other as a practice of self-elaboration.¹² The entire novel, in fact, could be read as a self vicariously accounting for itself in the context of the uneven histories of diaspora, familial struggle, state racism, and globalization. But what I want to pinpoint is how the narrator’s regular use of the second person shows that recognition is always both a consolidation and dispossession of the subject making the address. The floating, shifting referent of “you” throughout the novel suggests a logic of substitutability through which the narrator identifies with differently located social, cultural, and economic subjects to the extent that the second-person emerges as a virtual field where identifications with various kinds of difference can all and equally be understood as an identification with “you.” That is, “you” marks the de facto consolidation of difference and the voiding of particularity. Thus, while the second person carries the sense of being the least mediated, most direct form of address, it nonetheless operates as a central technology of social abstraction—“you” works in the novel as the virtual second person.

The primary place where the narrator translates the particularity of his “I” into Thong’s “you” is in the transactional relation between discourses of sexuality and postcolonial capital’s organization of labor. While labor is useful as a term of solidarity for workers in disparate areas, it risks folding into one another the racial, gender, sexual, and national discourses deployed to stratify labor.¹³ Labor—and not, for instance, language, race, or sexuality—is the narrator’s initial axis of identification with Thong. Upon meeting Thong for a second time at the bar, the narrator slips into confessional mode:

I want to tell him a lot of things. I want to say: I’ve held this job before. Or something like it anyway. How do you think I came up with the plane fare? You think I come over here every year like some chinky dentist’s son? I worked hard to get back here. I want to tell him: This job will take you nowhere. But why kid ourselves when we’re living proof of a bigger truth. This job will take you everywhere. (Chua 13)

Here labor opens as the currency with which the narrator identifies with Thong while dis-identifying with the transnational bourgeoisie. The narrator figures his transnational mobility not as an effect of the uneven concentration of capital (i.e., he insists he is not part of the Gay International) but as an effect of sexual labor. Put differently, he uses the history of his own sex work in the US to locate himself on the side of informal, non-accumulative labor. He implies that they are both there as a result of sexual labor and, in so doing, occludes one of central strategies of capitalist expansion from Fordism on: that of making the commodities produced through the exploitation of labor available for consumption by the workers themselves. This occlusion happens in the rhetorical space between “this job” and “something like it.”

In this passage, these non-commensurate forms of labor are made equivalent by a cultural logic invested in figuring labor in the abstract, in categories such as “sex worker.” Race, in the narrator’s account, does not particularize abstract labor; it supplements it. “Sex worker” becomes “Thai sex worker,” which in this case contradicts “Asian” as the racial formation of diasporic Asians. The narrator identifies with Thong through what he insists are their shared racial and work histories: he, like Thong, is not “some chinky dentist’s son” on a sexual junket (13). This racial supplement is, counterintuitively, the very mode through which Thong is abstracted and departicularized. As the narrator recognizes Thong in and through racialized labor, he stitches his own life narrative onto Thong’s such that the narrator can come to terms with his failed abusive relationship with Jim in the US. The narrator thus positions Thong as a vicarious figure used to interpret his own experiences of the transnational contours of an American racialized sexual economy. His positioning of Thong is ambivalent in its effects as it illuminates the neocolonial aspects of US sexual economies even while speciously suggesting that domestic American neocoloniality is an adequate frame for imagining the postcolonial economic in Thailand.

Indeed, after explaining why he confesses, the narrator asks, “[W]ould you believe I’ve never been with anyone like him before. . . . What do I mean by that, like him? Like *me*” (13; emphasis in original). He imagines them in community (i.e., as a “we” [14]) because they have both

been hailed as simultaneously labor and commodity, both of which are inserted into hierarchies of value according to sexualized racial difference. They are each, as the businessman on the train says of the narrator, “a piece of work” (5): a bearer and product of labor power. In the transition from “like him” to “like *me*,” sex tourism reveals itself as an occasion for thinking through the discourses of sexuality and race that produce value in postcolonial economic formations. This logic of verisimilitude renders the sexual-economic relation reversible such that the narrator, by providing Jim as a supplemental third figure, imagines himself as subject to the kinds of exploitation that he is presently reproducing.

Chua thus cautions not only against the globalization of Anglo-American understandings of sexual identity—what some refer to as the homonormalization of dissident sexual and gender formations—but also and more radically against a theoretical frame that imagines queer globality through a logic of shared oppressions. That is, even as Chua implicitly critiques the reduction of non-analogous sexual and gender performances and embodiments to the homogeneous category “gay,” he suggests that the pluralization of such a category through the attachment of ethno-racial and national markers might itself have universal aspirations all the more difficult to track precisely because it is spoken in and through the terms of difference (e.g., gay diasporic Asian). By tracking these terms through multiple scenes of recognition (at the bar, with Thong at home, in the park, etc.), Chua maps numerous ways that queer desire is produced out of particular political-economic formations. Chua suggests postcolonial capitalism is a domain that queers certain subjects in the service of differentiating formal and informal economies. He also suggests it to be a domain legitimated by a queer politics that persistently reorganizes desire (sexual and otherwise) to mark itself as totalized and self-sustaining. Multicultural recognition serves as the field of exchange where the continuous circulation of racial and sexual currencies produces value without the presumption of stable subjects and subjectivities.

III. Queer Racialization and the Value of Love

Observations about value suffuse the narrator’s reflections on his relationship with Jim and provide the lens through which he recognizes

and identifies with Thong. While thinking back on his time with Jim, the narrator claims he “was almost obsessed with [his own] value” but “would never count the money left on top of [his] clothes” because he “was never really a prostitute” but rather “more of a worthy companion, someone who knew the prices and the categories” for his sexual labor and that his social and intimate roles “had already been fixed” (57). At once “obsessed” with value yet unwilling to count the money, the narrator figures value as something that supersedes those market relations expressed through money even as the exchange of money for sexual labor serves as a reminder that the relationship is organized by market logic. By figuring himself as a “worthy companion” instead of a prostitute, he is valued as “worthy” even as he disavows a relation between his worth and the sexual labor he performs. That is, the narrator locates himself within a sexualized formation of value even as he suggests that the production of value is not simply produced in and through the confrontation of labor (the narrator) and capital (Jim). The implication is that the production of value cannot simply be explained through the smooth transition from money to commodities and back to money. Rather, there are other orders of value that supplement the market to make it appear as though it were absolute. These modes of valuation are irreducible to the economic domain but nevertheless ensure its extensiveness and continued growth.¹⁴

Chua locates these extra-economic modes of valuation at the intersection of racialized understandings of embodiment, sexualized forms of belonging, and practices of recognition as self-elaboration. In his accounts of raced embodiment, the narrator describes his skin as “the color of decay” and his body as “an open sore” (60, 208). By giving an account of his racially abject body in relation to Jim’s whiteness, the narrator describes a corporeality that can make him intelligible and equivalent to Thong. That is, sexualized racial embodiment is the pivot for auto- and allo-identification, and his relationship with Jim provides a context for imagining his “I” as Thong’s “you.” Thus, it is not—or not simply—that his particularities as a queer diasporic person of color foreclose his access to the universal but rather that a notion of the universal emerges for him through processes of queer racialization. He recodes the very

differences that render him valuable in the sexualized racial order of US capitalism as universal categories that connect him to Thong. By figuring himself as substitutable through discourses of race and sexuality so as to recognize and be recognized by Thong, the narrator upends the metaphors so often assigned to the queer diasporic subject. He is neither fundamentally transgressive, nor simply the other of the colonial gaze.¹⁵ The narrator, that is, cannot not be thought of as an agent of postcolonial capitalist expropriation but neither can he be understood as separate from the processes of racialization, exploitation, and domination that have captured his body as capital remaps the globe. His particularity in one instance gets reorganized in another as the grounds for a new universal. This is the calculus through which value gets produced under multicultural recognition: difference is produced as the ground for the universal such that claims to difference counterintuitively establish the subject’s formal equivalence to all others, thus granting her access to universality. Universality in this account is bolstered by difference and particularity.¹⁶

The narrator’s claim is staged not through logics of identity and identification but through alterity, at the very limits of language. The narrator reflects:

It never occurred to you before what friendship would be like with someone who was like you. Outside the law. Now you struggle to name it. You and Thong will always face each other without term or convenient words. You face each other with nothing to assure you about the meaning of the movement that carries you across borders. That carries you toward each other. He and you have to invent a relationship that is still formless. Have to invent a friendship outside laws, rules, and habits. A friendship that is like a building[,] . . . made of everything through which you can give each other pleasure. . . . There is no model or blueprint for its construction. There is not even a name. This kind of crime is not included in the term *khalwat*. This kind of building is not described by the word *home*. But an idea that is not formulated in a name can still exist. It finds expression in other forms. (105–06; emphasis in original)

Marking a conjuncture of language, sexuality, migration, and belonging, the narrator links himself to Thong by means of an analogy that figures them both “outside the law” and without the means of representation. By claiming that their intimacies are not governed by *khalwat*—the Syariah injunction against indecent proximity between unmarried men and women—the narrator summons heterosexual conjugality as a terrain of disidentification and “invent[s]” in its stead a “formless” relationship he names “friendship.” While he identifies pleasure as the architecture of this relationship, the narrator stages it as friendship to mark the relationship in excess of (homo)sexuality. Friendship thus serves as a placeholder for a structure of feeling “at the very edge of semantic availability” and not yet articulable through available discourses of social and sexual intimacy (Williams 134).

By emphasizing a new kind of relationship, the narrator de-privileges the material conditions of the relationship’s production and figures it in utopic terms, marking friendship a virtual domain as both a not-now and a not-yet-here. However, his comments also presume a form of mutual recognition specific to a field of commensuration that, since not “formulated in a name” (Chua 106), is intelligible only as affect. In claiming friendship, the narrator likewise emphasizes the non-instrumental aspects of his relationship with Thong. He subordinates the post-colonial economic dimension of their relationship by provincializing sex and privileging friendship; his deployment of friendship occludes the violence of sexual capitalism and the uneven relations of power that subtend them, imagining in their place an egalitarian partnership wherein both parties work together to produce a new relationship. Friendship, in short, supplements postcolonial capitalist formations of value while hiding their production in the name of “invent[ing] a relationship” together “outside the law” (106, 105).

Like friendship, love ontologizes social relations in corporeal and psychic sensations of pleasure. In fact, the two terms function more or less interchangeably for the narrator. In naming friendship an architecture of pleasure and love a language of action, he blurs distinctions between the psychic and the sensate. By linking love to action and distinguishing it from “feeling” (86), he situates it as pre-subjective—as inhering

in the potentiality of the action and not merely an effect of the feeling individual. This ontologizes love as the condition of social and intimate possibility: love presumes the subject but, in so doing, is not proper to it. The narrator comes to this definition of love after trying to account for the sensations that Thong’s body gives his and that he claims cannot be adequately accounted for in narrative. As he attempts to narrate these sensations, he finds that he can only mark them through their resistance to language. “[I]t would never be enough to merely describe his skin,” he notes, because “I would always mistake that description—superficial, gloating of conquest—for the actual experience of touching him” (85). He thinks of sensation as unmediated and pre-discursive and thus locates love as a “language” before language (86)—as a means of communication between bodies that does not presume history or grammatical norms. In emphasizing the materiality of bodies—their thereness and tactility—he abstracts them from their conditions of production. Abstraction in this instance does not proceed through de-particularization but through a hyper-particularization that forgets its context. The matter of the body is mistaken for how bodies are made to matter while sensation is mistaken as recognition.

However, Chua persistently disrupts this process of abstraction by marking the instrumental/usurious aspects of the relationship. These disruptions refigure love as a mode of production under postcolonial capitalism. In so doing, they rehistoricize love and offer considerations of how love—normatively understood as a fundamental good and a salve for social violences—legitimizes postcolonial modes of production. At the very moments he uses love to distinguish production, exploitation, and domination from intimacy, sensuality, and pleasure (relegating the former to the public sphere and the latter to the private sphere), the narrator heightens the contradictions between love as an intimate ideal and its use as a mode of capitalist regulation. Thus, his insistence on pleasure and domesticity counterintuitively marks an expansion of capital in the affective domain.

This expansion is evident even prior to his meeting Thong. The first night the narrator goes to the bars in Bangkok he asks a callboy why he is not in school. This question, the narrator claims, betrays their “funda-

mental difference” and shows “how long [he has] been away”—“What a stupid question,” he remarks, “I promise to spend the rest of my life here in repentance, but only if I can fall in love” (9). This question is “stupid” because it betrays the narrator’s position of relative privilege and his ignorance of the postcolonial economics that conditions their encounter. By making his “repentance” contingent on “fall[ing] in love,” he positions love against these conditions but, in so doing, stabilizes love—and not the lover—as the desired object.¹⁷ Love for the narrator is desirable because it enables a certain form of self-elaboration (repentance) seemingly bracketed from logics of sovereignty and conquest.¹⁸ His vow to repent for his ignorance of postcolonial market relations entrenches those relations as the ground on which repentance can happen in the first place. It intensifies the affective valence of those relations by seeming to take them out of the marketplace.

As his relationship with Thong grows more fractious, the narrator increasingly defines love as a refuge from the market and a binding to the domestic sphere. Thus, at one point he implies that his relationship is outside postcolonial modes of production because he and Thong have chosen to love “without reproducing the plantation’s labor force” (99). Elsewhere he also claims that Thong

loves me so much, he takes me home to live with him.

—We can save money this way, he says. —The hotels are so expensive. (29)

He links “love” to “home” and interprets his presence in Thong’s domestic world as evidence of how their relationship supersedes the market relations that set it in motion. He reads Thong’s desire to save money as an index of his desire for intimacy, unmediated by the market. But this causes the narrator to forget that the domestic is itself a site of production (particularly in informal economies) and that the relocation from the semi-public space of the hotel to the private space of Thong’s family home both extends his increasingly meager finances and partially sequesters him from the sexual marketplace so that Thong can be free of the narrator’s increasing jealousy. In short, the narrator reads this domestic turn as an expression of intimate recognition that is norma-

tively “opposed to interested attachment, to use, to usury” (Povinelli, “Gridlock” 230).

The narrator interprets Thong’s invitation to live with him as a fundamental break with contravening social and economic realities, buying the multiculturalist ruse that love is based on unmediated mutual recognition and forgetting that love is a norm of recognition generated out of economic, kinship, and other social relations. Furthermore, by reading Thong’s invitation as a sign of love, the narrator relies on a definition of home that recouples sex and intimacy, which the narrator understands to have been severed by the commodification of sex. While refusing the mystified notion that the heteronormative family home is a beacon of care in an exploitative postcolonial context, Chua also refuses to put in its place an idealized home produced as a necessary response to alienation and estrangement from origins and generated from the protocols of recognition, volition, and affiliation often assumed to organize queer diasporic homes and their associated kinship formations. Instead, Chua queers home such that it is neither a point of departure (away from heteropatriarchy) nor arrival (toward queer kinship).

By queering home and emphasizing the failures of multicultural recognition in queer diaspora, Chua offers neither a liberatory vision of queer worldmaking nor a program for resisting the violence of postcolonial capital. Rather, as an archive of failure, *Gold* shows how queer diasporic social and economic exchange, facilitated by floating currencies from “colliding worlds” (Chua 113), are critical sites for interrogating the operation of and subjectivities produced by postcolonial capitalism. In so doing, *Gold* reveals granular and ever-shifting configurations of power otherwise hidden by the rigid categories of race, nation, and class that circulate in conventional critiques of globalization, neocolonialism, and US imperialism. As I hope my reading of the novel shows, a queer diasporic critique of how postcolonial capitalism engages with multicultural recognition demonstrates its usefulness for interrogating the specific operations of postcolonial capitalism in Southeast Asia. With its emphasis on virtuality, discontinuity, and difference in the cultural forms and practices used to suture formal and informal postcolonial economies, *Gold* unsettles the dominant representational regime, clear-

ing space for a queer diasporic politics to come—a politics oriented neither to restoration of lost histories nor the productions of new communities but rather to the ruptures that, in flashes, reveal worlds not wholly subsumed by capital.

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Notes

- 1 Here I draw on Manalansan's incisive critique of the imperial logics of "gay identity" in "In the Shadows of Stonewall." I borrow the term "sexual public" from Warner, who describes it as a domain of stranger sociability organized around sex outside of the private sphere and irreducible to identity-based notions of community (62).
- 2 Sanyal uses "permanently surplus" in reference to those populations made up of "people whose lives as producers have been subverted or destroyed by the thrust of the process of expansion of capital, but for whom the doors of the world of capital remain forever closed" (53).
- 3 Implemented in hopes of thwarting the devaluation set in motion by capital flight and speculative attacks in the market, this financialization of the economy only perpetuated the cataclysmic devaluation of the Bhat. With it came a freeze in liquidity, a spike in interest rates, high levels of unemployment, and widespread bankruptcy. Following the implementation of International Monetary Fund (IMF) policies that required a redrawing of Thailand's constitution in the service of financial and market liberalization, foreign direct investment took advantage of newly favorable exchange rates and flooded the region, buying firms at fire sale prices.
- 4 Fortier, in turn, borrows "reprocessed" from James. Gopinath offers a similar argument in *Impossible Desires*.
- 5 In Sanyal's account, postcolonial capitalism does not take a progressive, developmental form whereby surplus populations are produced for subsequent incorporation into capitalist modes of production. Rather, this population is maintained in perpetuity in what Sanyal calls a "need economy" (69). This economy is "an ensemble of economic activities undertaken for the purpose of meeting needs, as distinct from activities driven by an impersonal force of systemic accumulation" (209). In the need economy, "the purpose of production is consumption," and "production is undertaken with the goal of obtaining money to purchase a [collection of consumer goods and] replace the initial stock so that the activity can be self-reproducing" (212).

- 6 If, as Ferguson argues, queer of color critique involves “disidentify[ing] with historical materialism to *rethink* its categories and how they might conceal the materiality of race, gender, and sexuality” (5; emphasis in original), then Sanyal’s account of postcolonial capitalism lends itself to a queer of color critical practice to the extent that Sanyal rejects historical materialism’s investment in narratives of transition and progress even while rethinking its understanding of surplus populations.
- 7 This command is similar to what Chow calls, in a US context, “coercive mimeticism,” a “process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected . . . to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imaginings of them as ethnics” (107).
- 8 As Ahmed notes, such distinctions “become oblique” and “do not keep their place” (“Sensitivity to Stigma” par. 7).
- 9 Indeed, over half of the novel—including a majority of the vignettes that describe the narrator’s sexual encounters—is written in the second person.
- 10 Tadiar argues that fantasy is not only a mode expressing pre-constituted material practices but also a semi-autonomous mode of production that organizes political and economic formations within and between nation-states.
- 11 My use of “Gay International” is aligned with that of Massad, who uses the term in reference to international gay rights organizations and their Euro-American members who frame gay travel as akin to a “missionary” task (362). The most prominent of these organizations, the International Lesbian and Gay Association, has an affiliate travel association that publishes guides and other materials that tout travel as a means of promoting sexual equality even while eliding the neocolonial contours of tourism and the sexual economies associated with it. For similar critiques of the Gay International, see Benedicto, Nast, and Puar.
- 12 For instance, in a passage that could easily be interpreted as about either Thong or himself, the narrator states, “Your problem. One interpretation: You look for guys like your father. Guys who can offer you the security your father was supposed to. But then, once they prove they can give you that security, you need to fuck them over” (127).
- 13 Lowe discusses the mechanics of this stratification in the chapter “Work, Immigration, Gender.”
- 14 Joseph offers a wonderful analysis of the supplementary relation between market value and cultural values; see also Jacobsen.
- 15 For an account of the metaphors of diaspora, see Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters*.
- 16 For a brilliant account of how “the universal” emerges through racialization, see da Silva.

- 17 To borrow from Barthes, “it is love the subject loves, not the object” (qtd. in Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 135).
- 18 “Falling” is thus important because it suggests both a lack of agency and a desire not only for love but for a certain kind of movement.

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