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A List of Queer Possibilities: (Dis)Orientating Objects in Selected Poems of Ocean Vuong and Chen Chen

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Abstract

Asian American poets such as Ocean Vuong and Chen Chen have gained some notoriety for their works, which explicitly explore queerness, domesticity, and identity. Through poems such as Chen's "In the City" and "When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities" and Vuong's "Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds," this paper explores how things that appear as deviant objects in these works can (dis)orient the reader's perception to offer a look into the queered ways of living embedded in the poems.

Building on Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" as they explored in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and Sara Ahmed's "orientation devices" in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), the paper identifies things encoded in lines of poetry that produce a discomfiting or disorienting effect in the reader. Berlant discusses the discomfort felt by the self that fails to experience a sense of optimism in things and activities that were previously associated with pleasure and comfort. Things that fail to yield a sense of optimism bring the subject face to face with the absence of optimism where it was expected, and in so doing, they function as "disorientation devices."

If orientation devices or things in a room help an individual locate themselves in the room, the disorientating objects defamiliarise the location of a subject in the world, sending them in an "emotional frenzy" (Butler) to identify themselves and their location with respect to other/new things in their proximity.

(Dis)Orientation devices serve yet another function: they build knowledge bridges between the subject and its Other. They allow the subject to transgress the boundaries of their subjective experiences and make way into the Other's ontological-epistemological space. Literature, the paper argues, can become a space where otherness is not resolved or mastered but rather a space that allows the self to remain open to what it cannot fully claim as its own.

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Keywords: *Queer Objects, (Dis)orientation Devices, Naive Knowledge, Cruel Optimism, Chen Chen, Ocean Vuong*

Introduction

Both Ocean Vuong and Chen Chen have always written from the heart, being both careful and reckless with each word, each rhyme, and rhythm. But neither author has been seriously studied. Nor has Asian American literature been recognised as a body of work separate from Asian literature, and often assumed to be a newer invention and a phenomenon set apart from the serious work that Literature does. There seems to be a conception that poetry, especially contemporary poetry by writers like Vuong and Chen, is only conveying subjective experiences and is read only for their racial difference or because they're queer. Through a literary take on Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), this paper attempts *queering* the ways of reading poems.

In keeping up with that promise, by closely reading three poems—"When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities" and "In the City" from Chen Chen's 2017 collection *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* and "Self Portrait as Exit Wounds" in Ocean Vuong's 2016 poetry collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*—we attempt to identify any such disorienting devices that may alter the perspective of the reader. In so doing, we hope to undo the literary injustices endured by relational/personal poetry that is cast as either too elegiac (as in Ocean's case) or too playful (as in Chen's case). Literary practices often relegate such poetry to be read for leisure, away from high theory and intellectual rigour.

In this paper, we are interested in the ways subjects come to know—where and who they are—through their relation to the objects that surround them. Orientation, in this sense, is never simply spatial; it is affective and phenomenological, produced through the encounter between bodies and things. Marta Figlerowicz, in *Spaces of Feeling: Affect and Awareness in Modernist Literature* (2017), turns to the opening scene of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, where the narrator, upon finding himself in a dimly-lit bedroom, to fully recover his sense of self, starts recalling the shapes of the objects in the room—the bed, the window, the door—these objects do not merely furnish the space, they provide the coordinates through which consciousness situates itself in the world (Figlerowicz 70). If orientation devices or things in a room help an individual locate themselves in the room, the disorientating objects defamiliarise the location of a subject in the world, sending them into an "emotional frenzy" to identify themselves and their location with respect to other/new things in their proximity¹ (Butler 100).

¹ Alice Butler discusses in her article "Have you tried it with three?" the impact of a triangular love affair on the marriage of Ruth and Leon. Ruth's constant re-arrangement of the household furnishings signifies her gendered position as inseparable from these domestic objects. Her "emotional frenzy" is born out of "unsettling kinship between objects, feelings, desires, and the bodies" and takes the form of "repeated and performative gestures."

In a similar vein, Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) discusses the discomfort felt by the self that fails to experience a sense of optimism in things and activities that had previously been associated with pleasure and comfort. Things that fail to yield a sense of optimism bring the subject face-to-face with the absence of optimism where it was expected, and in so doing, they function as “disorientation devices.” We turn to the poems of Vuong and Chen to ask what happens when objects no longer secure the subject’s place in the world but unsettle it. Here, things do not function as mnemonic anchors that restore continuity between past and present; instead, they interrupt recognition, reroute attention, and estrange the speaking voice from familiar coordinates of home, body, and kinship.

Literature Review

Queer Phenomenology and Orientation Devices

Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2020) reinterprets the relationship between orientation towards (and away from) objects, inhabitation within living spaces, and the spatiality of sexual desire. The idea of orientation in “sexual orientation,” argues Ahmed, once posed as a phenomenological question, allows one to think about how bodies reside in space, how spaces are sexualized, and how bodies take shape by reaching out for objects (1-2). To orient oneself in a room, the mind constructs a conceptual map of the room by calculating the distance of the body from the objects within it. Reachability to the objects suggests the proximity to the objects—to be able to influence them. But it is not just the objects that the body influences. The body reaches out for the objects to be able to extend itself in space.

Objects function as “orientation devices” when they orient the subject's sense of perception in a particular way. Acting as objects of desire, they capture attention and set a direction for the subject. When multiple bodies are oriented toward the same object(s), they could be said to have the “same direction.” Having a common object of desire creates a sense of affinity—a marker of identity—in being directed *toward* a shared object, as a direction that is repeated over time, they are also orientated *around* a shared object (Ahmed 120).

Filipe Carreira da Silva and Julius Rogenhofer (2023), analysing the material dimensions of populism, posit that wearable objects, such as the red MAGA caps worn by Donald Trump's supporters and the fluorescent vests worn by the French yellow vest protesters, embody a new populist way of doing politics (2). These mundane objects become populist signs through collective ritual practice vis-à-vis being worn by collectives of human agents (10). These proximate objects help identify the body with ideas. As the objects become inseparable from the ideas they represent, the proximity of these populist objects to the body ensures that the body becomes indistinguishable from ideas. Wearing political, populist symbols on the body is an identity marker: when people from diverse backgrounds

prioritise being identified with a political ideology or certain unarranged political ideas over their caste/class affiliations.

But becoming orientated by objects in a particular direction is not a new phenomenon. Referring to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991), Ahmed argues that with the emergence of print capitalism, the newspaper became a national “orientation device.” While different readers would concentrate on different news stories, “the very act of reading means that citizens are directing their attention toward a shared object” (Ahmed 119). Similarly, poems and literature can tether diverse readers together by making them face the same direction; the words and signifiers of real-world objects occurring in literary texts function as “orientation devices” when they help the reader construct a conceptual map of the imagined scenario.

Orientation involves making the strange familiar by extending the body into space. A failed orientation attempt causes the body to experience a sense of unease—like it has been put “out of place.” When the body extends itself and encounters hostility, the feelings experienced can linger, creating a disposition for places yet to be inhabited (10-1). Queer phenomenology helps us consider how sexuality entails “ways of inhabiting and being inhabited by space.” Ahmed posits that how we are orientated sexually is crucial to the bodily orientation—how bodies are extended in space (67).

If heterosexual orientation is the assumed normal sexual orientation, directed along a straight line toward the “other sex,” homosexual orientation is when desires are directed towards the “same sex.” Sexual desire thus imagined orientates the subject by “establishing a line or a direction.” Queer orientation does not conform to the straight lines of desire (70-1). Queer or deviant desire slants or curves in a way that sexual impulse follows “an object which is normally outside the sphere of sexual desire, and yet possesses all the attributes which in other respects appeal to human affection” (Havelock Ellis as qtd. in Ahmed 71).

The heterosexual lines of desire lead to the establishment of the artificial social group, the “family.” For members of the family, to be able to identify with the family is to seek its approval, and in due time, to straighten one's desires *in line* with the desires of the family, i.e., the reproduction of the family line. The effect of queer desire, inasmuch as it takes a person off the heteronormative course, is to produce disappointment and rage in the father whose body is “metonymically associated with the body of the family” (Ahmed 73-4).

The Cruel Optimism of Objects

Objects contain hopes and ideas of “the good life.” Possessing material objects is associated with the experience of romantic love, social mobility, political enfranchisement and even knowledge production. One's social worth is often gauged from the range of material objects one can assert their

ownership rights over. Having diversified knowledge is easily equated with owning an array of books on a diverse range of subjects. Objects assist in the extension of the realm of fantasy to the real world. For Lauren Berlant, “fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealising theories and tableaux about how they and the world ‘add up to something’.” The good life fantasies of post-World War Two optimism, revived again by the neo-liberal policies of Regan and Thatcher in the West, and Narasimha and Manmohan in India, made it possible to relate labour, work, growth and happiness with possession of certain material objects (Berlant 2).

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant discusses what happens when things that were supposed to produce a sense of optimism are hollowed of the affective experience. The subject shares a strong sense of attachment to the “object of [their] desire.” This attachment has an affective component that ensures the continued pursuit of the “object of desire.” The attachment that is maintained to the “object of desire” is continued even after the realisation that the said “object of desire” might not be attainable, sheer fantasy, or straight up a toxic endeavour. Berlant argues that the discovery of the true and unfavourable nature of the “object of desire” does not dissuade the subject from continuing wanting it because “the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (24).

She defines cruel optimism as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object.” In its operation, cruel optimism turns the “object/scene of desire” into the “object/scene of attrition.” The continued pursuit of the object results in the attrition of the subject. This is often observed in pursuing an unreciprocated romantic interest, workaholism, patriotism and other obsessive tendencies (24-5). In following the same popular objects/scenes of desires, subjects convince themselves “to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others...” (26). Is that because there is a comfort in knowing that you are not alone in your quest? Or is it because the idea of uniqueness and, therefore, elevated chances of unattainability of one's object/scene of desire impose a certain sense of aloofness on the subject?

In any case, the cruel optimism of objects establishes relations through which a sense of passivity is attained: a way through which “we can sustain a coasting sentience, in response to being too alive [?]” (43). The performative pursuit of the same objects/scenes of desires under the neoliberal system produces subservient subjects whose sovereign actions only have the effect of appearing independent and personal (15). Seldom does it happen that optimism unfolds in the form of a strong commitment to an ideal, to the queer utopic, that may feel naïve or stupid—it “manifests an intelligence beyond rational calculation” (2).

The Reoriented and The Knowledges of the Naïve

Orientation with respect to the nearby objects only comes into consciousness when this sense of orientation is lost. Disorientation, in that sense, serves a crucial function: it makes the awareness of orientations possible. As Ahmed herself writes, “it is by understanding how we become orientated in moments of disorientation that we might learn what it means to be orientated in the first place” (6). She also says that, “If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails” (11).

Disorientation can feel unsettling. The loss of one's beliefs, the loss of a home, or the loss of the very ground on which one stands can induce a strong negative affect—“a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, [that] might persist and become a crisis” (Ahmed 157; ch. 4). As bodies search for a place to reground themselves, or new objects to reorientate themselves in accordance with them, they experience a “loss.” The experience of “loss” acquaints the body with the presence of what is now absent, i.e., it makes the present absence of the *something* (what has been *lost*) take a more significant place than the *lost something* originally occupied. Ahmed argues that “the ‘loss’ itself is not empty or waiting; it is an object, thick with presence.” The moment of the “loss” of the perspective is also the moment of realisation of the perspective (158).

As the body moves to fill the absences with a “new” something, it reorientates itself. Overcoming disorientation is a process of trial and error: “disorientation involves failed orientations” (160). Some bodies, particularly bodies of colour or differently abled bodies, can experience that they are “out of place,” surrounded by objects that do not extend their reach or spaces that do not extend their shape. Disorientation occurs when objects fail to gather on the ground to create a “sympathetic spatial arrangement” (Ahmed 160; Brennan 87).

Disorientation introduces strangeness in between the body and its objects. This strangeness or the loss of a perspective is “what brings these objects to life and makes them dance.” To be made estranged with a certain “commonsensical” way of doing things, which further involves a certain specific way of inhabiting the space, does not have to coincide with the loss of the traditional, or the loss of the historical. A fresh perspective that queers the space between the body and its objects is, in Ahmed's words, “not to lose sight of their history but to refuse to make them history by losing sight” (Ahmed 162-4).

Directionality afforded by heterosexual desires fails to orientate the sexually disoriented. “Heteronormative common sense,” argues Jack Halberstam, “leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope.” Common sense, in the Gramscian sense, is the production and universalisation of heteronormative norms. The sexually

disoriented can disorientate common-sensical norms by questioning the implied logic of norms, and by failing to follow what adds to their disorientation (89).

Brinda Bose, in her essay “Slouching Toward an Aesthetics of Failure,” posits that “it is a dangerous moral instinct that cannot understand the irrationality and singularity of passions, and so seeks to condemn all.” What starts out as “a paralysis of vocabulary”—an inability to talk about emotion, desire and action—poorly conflates expression with aggression, ends up imposing the diktats of “common sense” without ever defining what it constitutes. Such common-sense presumptions take the citizens of a nation as a homogenous category with one way of sense-making dominating all others.

Halberstam argues that the identification and surfacing of “subjugated knowledges” requires: (a) resisting the mastery of disciplinary knowledge; and (b) privileging the naïve or the ignorant over the rational or the established. He quotes Foucault, “Disciplines...define not a code of law, but a code of normalisation.” The disciplinary forms of knowledge “qualify and disqualify, legitimate and delegitimate, reward and punish” people and their sense-making processes in order of their hierarchy in the social order. Resisting the hegemony of dominant ways of knowing opens up space for what Foucault calls “naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (Halberstam 11-2).

Second, the stupidity that is attached to resisting common sense can imply not just the lack of knowledge but intentional limits put on certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing. Privileging the naïve, the non-sensical may allow the marginalised, the oppositional forms of knowing to take centre stage. Failing to conform is thus not an underachievement; it is the very achievement of passivity that is required to not get spooked by heterosexual desires. Queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense, therefore, involve associating “failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique” (Halberstam 12, 89).

Methodology

In Halberstam's analysis of *Dude, Where's My Car?*, the witless comedic duo, Jesse and Chester, experience a chain of nonsensical events that could shatter anyone's perspective. However, the stupid white male buddies exhibit a sense of forgetfulness and wonder at every turn that allows them to cease “the developmental and progress narratives of heteronormativity” (59-60). The stupidity and the naiveté implied in certain ‘to be(s)’ and ‘to do(s)’ make the unfamiliar less scary and safe enough for the subject to make the jump into the strange and not-yet-comprehensible. This paper segues into literary texts less conventional and seeks to foreground such strange methodologies. The marginalized and the oppositional forms of knowing are represented by the categories of such strange objects of knowledge. Once centred as the object of inquiry, marginalized and Othered epistemologies can re-ground the core beliefs and base assumptions of our knowledge systems.

The queer objects in Chen and Young's poetry present such re-grounding procedures via the employment of textual and imaginative categories such as “disorientation devices.” Queer, or counterhegemonic modes of making sense might appear nonsensical to the untrained eye but form effective tools of critique and analysis. Their effectiveness relies on their insistence that just because something is stupid does not mean that it is not to be attempted.

Self Portrait as Exit Wounds

In “Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds,” Ocean Vuong struggles with an identity associated with the complex aftermath of the Vietnam War. Born in Saigon, Vuong fled Vietnam and resettled in Hartford, CT, with his parents and his maternal grandmother. Shortly after this migration, Vuong’s father abandoned the family from their homeland, but also due to the post-war trauma that tore his family apart. Vuong has a white grandfather, which further complicates his relationship with the War and his identity.

Vuong writes, “Instead, let it be the echo to every footstep drowned out by rain, cripple the air as a name flung onto a sinking boat” (1-3). These are the very first lines of the poem, and the “it” might function, to the casual reader, almost as if it were a vague placeholder because the poet never makes it explicit that “it” is a ‘bullet’ fired from a gun. We follow the bullet, or the speaker’s mind, as it travels through dreadful, tragic scenes of war and its aftermath and moves to a joyful American home, which, symbolic of Vuong’s mixed race-ness, tells us how the bullet would pierce through all of this. The bullet, fired from a rifle, becomes a *disorienting object* that reshapes the life of the poet, who is still grappling with the consequences of the war as a child of war survivors.

The bullet tells the story of a recasting of history; a redemption story told through the voice of a queer American body. He has not witnessed it himself, but a poetic reimagination, in the form of a shot being fired, a bullet—the disorienting device of the poem—what “it” can do, what it can mediate and transform, through time and space, the intergenerational trauma and memory. Vuong says of the bullet reaching the American soldier:

his blond hair flickering in napalm-blasted wind, let it pin
 him down to dust where his future daughters rise,
 fingers blistered with salt & Agent Orange, let them
 tear open his olive fatigues, clutch that name hanging
 from his neck, that name they press to their tongues
 to relearn the word live, live, live—but if (Vuong 33-38)

Our reading of the sheer presence of this “it”—the bullet— highlights the redirection of the speaker’s experience, his trajectory in processing events, desire and ultimately, his identity to understand and reveal the philosophy of the object to determine a disorientation and thus, a reorientation. We contend that the bullet is a queer object, possessing queer effects. Not only does the bullet pierce through the white family home, but it also tears open and damages the intimacies of heteronormative-coded spaces and denies the political import of the gendered sphere coded as ‘private,’ as Shannon Brennan contends in *Queer Feeling* (Brennan, 86).

But how does one truly conceptualise a queer disorientation? Is it located in the body of the queer person? Or does it emerge from the object only? There are all these odds that an unsettling object may recalibrate and redirect a person’s line of direction, a trajectory shift could happen so emphatically, and, in this case, a life lived with the trauma and tragedies of war, racism and homophobia, an object such as a bullet which, when fired, causes a dramatic change in subjective and social figuration.

The bullet, as a disorienting object, looms large all over the poem, running through the body of the poem, repeated over and over, as if to mimic the vast mindscapes of the speaker, who is contending with the “postmemory”² of war. The bullet travels across different scenes/scenarios, moving between the hazy boundaries of memory, metaphor and reality. To combat and redeem, through our unnamed “it”—a single bullet against bullets of the past, resounding and resonating, but now to be disoriented, as Vuong writes: “...like the footsteps of ghosts misted through rain / as I lower myself between the sights—& pray / that nothing moves” (43-45).

The parts where the mind of the speaker moves between the present and the past, his own present that he is aware of, and the past of his mother and grandmother, remind us of *postmemory*: “The post-war generation ‘remembers’ these powerful experiences by means of the images, stories, behaviours, and affects transmitted by their family members.”³ (Nguyen 433).

The mind of the speaker travels with the bullet and makes visitations to scenes that are populated by objects—a sinking boat, kapok’s bark, bones beneath a sidewalk, a refugee camp sick with smoke, a shack rusted black, etc. It also enters a cosy room covered in soft light and laughter, Wonder Bread, mayonnaise, and a Michael Jackson poster glistening over the couch. The juxtaposition

² ‘Postmemory’ is a concept Marianne Hirsch explored in her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012). Postmemory describes “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up.” This concept was studied in the context of the Holocaust, but is relevant and applicable to other traumatic events, and we use it in our study in the context of the Vietnam War.

³ This is from Kelly Nguyen in “Queer Telemachus: Ocean Vuong, Postmemories and the Vietnam War” (Nguyen 433).

is clear, intentional and thick. The objects of war and violence, and the objects inside a happy American home, a family unaware of the tragedies their country caused. The bullet creates ruptures everywhere, in both contrasting scenarios, to disorientate and re-suture, as Vuong describes, a narrative made possible only through loss. The path of the bullet along different objects that it destroys, alters, ruptures, and kills makes way for a story of survival and redemption, instead of a resolution, which is never granted.

She could boil my father in it, and he'd come out a better person

In “In the City,” Chen Chen opens the poem with the imagery of moving around in a city with his friend:

These bridges are a feat of engineering. These pork & chive dumplings
 we bought together, before hopping on a train
 & crossing bridges, are a feat of engineering. Talking to you, crossing bridges
 in trains, eating pork & chive dumplings in your bright boxcar
 of a kitchen in Brooklyn, is an engineer's dream-feat
 of astonishment. Tonight I cannot believe
 the skyline because the skyline believes in me, forgives me my drooling
 astonishment over it & over the fact that this happens,
 this night, every night, its belief, glittering mad & megawatt like the dreams
 of parents. By the way, is this soy sauce
 reduced sodium? Do you know? Do we care? High, unabashed sodium intake!
 Unabashed exclamation points! New York is an exclamation
 I take, making my escape, away from the quiet snowy commas of Upstate
 & the mess of questions marking my Bostonian past. (Chen 1-17)

The poem begins with the first usage of what we suggest is a crucial disorienting device of the poem: the ‘bridge.’ As it occurs over and over in the poem, signifying a journey made from a culture to another, from a generation to another, with the journey repeating as the poet navigates his relationship with New York City, American life and his Chinese roots. A journey that many immigrants in the United States make to come to terms with their “diasporic double-consciousness” (Bhardwaj 4-5). In dedicating the poem to his Asian American friend, Monica Sok, Chen Chen recalls that he was not alone in this journey. Like many immigrant children, they had a *migrant orientation*: in the food that

they consumed (“pork & chive dumplings”), in the “dreams of [their] parents,” they faced the same direction—*home*. For immigrant children, home cannot only mean what it means for their parents, the homeland; they have a similar migrant orientation as their parents, but not the same. Home is what they choose to make out of it.

Edith Wharton's first book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), assumes that intimate relationships require the complicity of material objects. In her queer reading of *The Decoration of Houses*, Shannon Brennan (2017) posits that the heterosexual objects, such as the furniture of a suburban home, in collaboration with sympathetic spatial arrangements, produce the ordering force necessary for keeping a bourgeois family together (Shannon 87). Orientations are inherited in the form of heterosexual desires contained in inanimate objects. Ahmed's insistence that family articles—fondue sets, family albums, values, capitals, and aspirations—carry affective traces of heterosexual modes of orientation and this is passed on to the next generation, materially (Ahmed 86; Shannon 88).

In crossing the bridge, the immigrant children are orientated in a straight line: *a towards* and *an away from*. In their orientation is implied a sense of disorientation of home—an “out of place,” an “out of line” experience. The *towards* and *away from* merge into one, the migrant faces two directions at once: “toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home” (Ahmed 10). The resolution of the disorientation, if it is ever achieved, entails accepting that “the value of the bridge lies in remaining on it, crossing it over and over”⁴ (Langa 354).

In New York we read Darwish, we write broken sonnets finally forgiving
 the Broken English of Our Mothers, we eat
 pork & chive dumplings, & I know, it's such a 90s fantasy
 of multiculturalism that I am
 rehashing, but still, in New York I feel I can tell you how my mother & I
 used to make dumplings together, like a scene
 out of *The Joy Luck Club*. The small kitchen, the small bowl of water
 between us. How we dipped index finger, thumb.
 Sealed each dumpling like tucking in a secret, goodnight.
 The meat of a memory. A feat of engineering.

⁴ The quote is taken from an article written by Justice Pius Langa, the former Chief Justice of the Republic of South Africa, who was writing about transformative constitutionalism and taking a note of the occurrence of the word “bridge” in the South African interim Constitution of 1993. The full quote is: “What is contended is that we should instead view the bridge of the interim Constitution as a space between an unstable past and an uncertain future. There is no preference for one side over the other, rather, the value of the bridge lies in remaining on it, crossing it over and over to remember, change and imagine new and better ways of being” (Langa 354).

A dream of mother & son. Interrupted by the father, my father
 who made my mother get on a plane, a theory,
 years of nowhere across American No's, a degree that proved useless.
 Proved he was the father. I try to build a bridge
 to my parents but only reach my mother & it's a bridge she's about to
 jump off of. I run to her, she jumps, she's
 swimming, saying, *Finally I've learned—all this time, trying to get from one useless
 chunk of land to another, when I should've stayed*

in the water. & we're drinking tap water in your bright Brooklyn kitchen. (Chen 18-37)

The burden of the journey made by the parents affects the children. The objects of heterosexual desire that the parents wanted and achieved fail to produce the same sense of optimism for the immigrant children. The pursuit of these objects only reveals the distance of these objects from the “dreams” of immigrant children. The pursuit gets crueller as it discloses the loss of nearness once felt by the immigrant children towards their parents. In their attempts to lessen the proximity to the material objects of the “dreams of [their] parents,” the younger ones realise the futility/falsity of the promise of optimism contained in the heterosexual objects.

What finally makes them take charge of their disenchantment with the cruelly optimistic articles and their self-reorientation, in light of and against the inherited orientations, is the eventual acceptance of the truth that their parents might not be happy and contented from the attainment of the very same objects they so cherish. When Chen Chen writes, “I try to build a bridge/ to my parents but only reach my mother & it's a bridge she's about to/ jump off of” (31-33), he has learnt of the great unhappiness that resides in his family. The synchronised choreography of the objects that seem so crucial for the maintenance of the bourgeois family often falls short of its promise. In correcting the alignment of his family members, he soon discovers that his father is too heterosexually oriented to free himself of his own inherited orientations. In his mother, he finds the affection that he seeks.

I don't know what to tell you. I thought I could
 tell this story, give it a way out of itself. Even here, in my fabulous
 Tony-winning monologue of a New York, I'm struggling to get
 to the Joy, the Luck. I tell you my mother still
 boils the water, though she knows she doesn't have to anymore.

Her special kettle boils in no time, is a feat of engineering.

She could boil my father in it

& he'd come out a better person, in beautiful shoes.

She could boil the Atlantic, the Pacific, every idyllic

American pond with its swans. She would. (Chen 38-47)

Separated from her homeland, his mother learnt to do what his father failed at—undoing her inherited orientation. When he writes, “my mother still/ boils the water, though she knows she doesn't have to anymore” (41-42). Chen acquaints the reader with a mother whom he has come to appreciate. Someone who struggled but then emerged victorious in her fight with inherited, patriarchal orientations—inherited from her family and her homeland—which shows in these lines: “Her special kettle boils in no time...She could boil my father in it/ & he'd come out a better person...She could boil the Atlantic, the Pacific, every idyllic / American pond with its swans. She would” (43-47).

The ‘boiling kettle’ is the second disorientation device used in this poem. It helps the reader to map the direction of the affective outburst of anger. What is queer about the particular way the ‘kettle’ has been instrumentalised is that outside of the ambit of this poem, it is a quotidian object which inspires absolutely no literary or romantic interest. It is not at all “a feat of engineering” that it has been called in the poem. The uniqueness of the kettle originates from the mother's placement of her anger on the water that boils in the kettle. The boiling water signifies her own boiling blood—her anger and disappointment—over all failed attempts to build bridges to her husband, her neighbours, her relatives, etc. Each seeking a different way of alignment with her. Then she finally submits to her anger (...it's a bridge she's about to/ jump off of. I run to her, she jumps, she's/ swimming) (32-34). An affective outburst is what led her to initiate the process of her reorientation. And, it eventually healed her son, too.

Chen Chen connects the two disorienting devices, the bridge and the kettle, by calling them “a feat of engineering.” The phrase apprises the reader of the artificiality of the two objects. The kettle and the bridge—one meant for immediate use and the other made to last. Objects—big and small; hard, soft or cushiony; bright, colourful or bland—all assert themselves on the subject by constraining the imagination of the subject through the myriad meanings and associations offered by their aesthetics.

Inaction in hopes of things eventually falling in place is a marker of the optimism's negativity. Berlant posits that optimism's negativity is symptomatic of a dark truth that “optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently” (Berlant 14). The ambivalence of what is implied by “having hope” made the sustenance

of a heterosexual family through the perfect choreography of the inherited heterosexual objects a discernible reality. Hope is an artificial construct that “often involves waiting for something specific to happen” (13).

A List of Queer Possibility

The opening of Chen Chen’s “When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities” is a catalogue of care: a future assembled out of the many ways the speaker hopes to be present for those around him:

To be a good
ex/current friend for R. To be one last
inspired way to get back at R. To be relationship
advice for L. To be advice
for my mother. To be a more comfortable
hospital bed for my mother. To be
no more hospital beds. To be, in my spare time,
America for my uncle, who wants to be China
for me. To be a country of trafficless roads
& a sports car for my aunt, who likes to go
fast... (Chen 1-11)

Here, Chen draws a rather interesting list of expectations that people in his life have of him. From wanting to be a good friend to his friends to being a good son to his Chinese American parents, his desires revolve around fulfilling what is expected of him. It is unclear when the object/scene of his desire came to overlap with that of his family's. In telling himself that these are the things that are expected of him, he lets “heterosexual common sense” dictate to him what is to be desired. The “hospital bed” of his mother's imagination is an orienting device that sets a direction for the poet and helps him locate himself with respect to the “financial security” dreams of his parents. In no way would a Chinese immigrant child be seen letting his parents down, who have travelled to a foreign land and provided for their kids. In his imagination, they will always find a place—their dreams are *to be* respected in every 'to be' that he can think of.

But when he fails, he fails at chasing the object of their desire. Maybe he realises that the object of his desire is different. Maybe, and quite possibly, he sees that his desires have no place to go if they are not placed after the ‘to be’ of his imagination. As a queer person, he is aware of the subjugation that such imposition of “heterosexual common sense” would bring. The sexually disoriented knows, in his heart (subconsciously), that is, if it is not declared explicitly, orientation attempts through a seemingly passive control over *what is to be desired* and *what is expected* of oneself would lead one astray from one's true “object of desire.” The queer art of failure is, in its truest sense, an art of resistance.

...To be a cyclone
of laughter when my parents say

their new coworker is *like that*, they can tell
because he wears pink socks, see, you don't, so you can't,

can't be one of them. To be the one
my parents raised me to be—

a season from the planet
of planet-sized storms.

To be a backpack of PB&J & every
thing I know, for my brothers, who are becoming

their own storms. To be, for me, nobody,
homebody, body in bed watching TV. To go 2D

& be a painting, an amateur's hilltop & stars,
simple decoration for the new apartment

with you. To be close, J.,
to everything that is close to you—

blue blanket, red cup, green shoes
with pink laces.

To be the blue & the red.
The green, the hot pink. (Chen 11-30)

If lists and the act of drawing such exhaustive lists that bind a subject to a specific set of tasks are part of a rationalisation process—one that attempts to instil heterosexual common sense in individuals—Chen Chen's “list of further possibilities” breaks from the commonsensical patterns of thinking, imagining, and doing. He builds a list of flashy, colourful, quirky objects that signify an attempt at queering the material surroundings. Every item on the list is queerer than the previous item (a backpack of PB&J, a painting, an amateur's hilltop & stars, a blue blanket, red cup, green shoes with pink laces, [the colour] hot pink).

Getting close to his partner, believes Chen Chen, has a material component in addition to the affective and emotional work poured into the relationship. The space that is collectively occupied by them is replete with queer objects. Queer objects are objects that make dysfunctional the heteronormative desires contained in mundane objects. Queering objects is to hollow them out of heterosexual desiring tendencies and inherited orientations.

When parents instruct their kids and make them learn not just—*what is to be desired* but also how it is to be desired—the children become the object of their desire. If not actively resisted and unlearned over time, these lessons can initiate the process of *objectification of the self*. The self, when it turns inwards, will find the desires of their parents in place of their own, reduced to an object that can only be acted upon. A self, objectified, cannot comprehend the nature and process of its subjugation. It becomes epistemologically inept to understand its own oppression, and in turn, contributes to the stifling of its own freedoms.

Pink socks are never not funny

At one point in the poem, Chen's parents expect him to laugh at their coworker for wearing pink socks. The coworker's association with a queer object, the “pink socks,” and his parents' disassociation with the same object by making a mockery of the association, becomes a wake-up call for the poet. The target of the mockery—the pink socks—is aligned in the same direction as him, a fact that allows him to realise that he might share more in common with the coworker than the people who have raised him. He wears clothes that appeal to his queer self. When the body extends itself in space and finds familiar, friendly objects, it feels emboldened by the positive affect generated on account of the orientation attempt.

In locating oneself in relation to queer objects, one orientates the self with respect to objects of one's choosing. Tethering the self to queer objects thus allows the self to be in control of *what it is* and *what it could be*. The reoriented self chooses its own *what is to be desired*. Objects displaced from their usual spatial arrangements and arranged in unconventional hierarchies throw the subject into an emotional frenzy. Lost and baffled, the subject searches for a new way to construct subjecthood in relation to the altered spatial arrangement, and discovers that a more autonomous way of the self's

extension was always within reach. Every disorientation presents a possibility of a reorientation. In the poem, the “hospital bed” is an orienting device, while the “pink socks” are a disorienting device. Changing the subject's perspective, the phrase “pink socks” as it appears in the poem, disorients the existing series of subject-object relations, offering a new way to examine the power relationships with the other subjects in proximity.

Queering objects uncover the human objectification and the subjectification of things as products of our affective engagements with the material world (Brennan 84). *Queering of objects* ensures that the affective engagement with the material world does not reproduce cycles of heterosexual and homosexual differentiation. If the placement of material objects induces specific patterns of orientation, a misplacement of objects can influence methods of reorientation.

Conclusion

In these poems, Young and Chen allow us to speculate on the epistemologies of the affective engagement with the material world. Objects not only anchor the subjects in the spaces they inhabit but also provide the conditions of their specific orientations. *Queering of objects* thus opens up the possibilities of reorientating the subjects or providing alternative sympathetic spatial arrangements that can nurture the re-grounding attempts on the part of the subjects seeking change.

The objects we discussed in each of the poems, while performing what we have theorised as “disorienting,” may not have given us resolutions or successes. Nonetheless, these objects—the bridge, the kettle, the bullet, the list, the pink socks—interfered with the heteronormative directionality and heterosexual objects supposed as necessary to make a life feel lived—progress, a heterosexual family, a good immigrant story, a more financially secured future, etc. To queer subjects, these objects fail to provide the contentment and happiness that is expected in their collective pursuit. The hospital bed in Chen’s “When I Grow Up...” functions as a cruelly optimistic object. Providing a financially secure future for his parents does not have to come at the cost of foregoing all his vulnerabilities and individuality, and a quest to fulfil his own dreams, but the emotional burden that queer bodies are made to carry makes it appear as a binary choice.

The pink socks, the kettle, and other odd objects function as queer objects because of the work of disorienting that they do. The pair of pink socks in Chen’s poem, for instance, is stupidly hilarious for his parents, whereas for him, it becomes a moment of queer realisation—an estrangement with the household arrangement of desires and perspectives. Thus, to be able to imagine alternative goals, to fail to walk on that path that one was led towards and guided on, but honing and mastering the art of failure instead, failing better and to thrive in new lines of direction. This paper has aimed to build the idea of the disorienting device as a kind of aesthetic by working with, rather than against, the being out-of-place-ness that comes with the shattering of the subject's perspective.

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