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Soft Subversion, Hard Exposition: Instrumental Sympathy and the Unattainable Multicultural Assemblage in *M. Butterfly*

Would Michael Luo's (1976–) feeling of an outsider as a descendant of Chinese immigrants disappear, had all racist insults melted thoroughly into the air? In a heated *New York Times* article titled “An Open Letter to the Woman Who Told My Family to Go Back to China,” the self-acknowledged member of the model minority discusses how his latent “pang of sadness” was triggered when an annoyed female pedestrian yelled “go back to China” to his family because they had apparently been in her way. To not escalate the already uncomfortable racial tension in this article, Luo uses mild symbolic allusions such as “a nice rain coat, iPhone 6s” to help the reader visualize the scenario. To him, this episode is merely one of the numerous instances in which Asian Americans have to experience and eventually relinquish a troubled feeling: “It’s this persistent sense of otherness that a lot of us struggle with every day. That no matter what we do, how successful we are, what friends we make, we don’t belong. We’re foreign. We’re not American” (Luo, 2016). What worries him are the deep-rooted and immutable prejudices that situate Asian Americans in a liminal space, haunted by the possibility that this hostility and alienation will incessantly recur.

Without respectful mutual recognition, the ideal of multiculturalism, which recognizes and celebrates the thriving of heterogeneous cultural heritages, remains a mythology. This leads us to the insecurity and uncertainty that Luo

ends the article with: “We’re from America, she told my daughter. But sometimes people don’t understand that. I hope you do now” (Luo, 2016). The flatness of his voice – devoid of any radical optimism that is typical of a political motto – delivers a doomsday view of the current social landscape, which the author himself sees as looming large. But would the otherwise – that is, racial hostility that morphs into sympathy or even fetishism for cultural otherness – serve to assuage Luo’s concern about the future of multiculturalism? If the racial wrath Luo encountered is an explicit form of cultural hegemony or power oppression, then David Henry Hwang’s (1957–) acclaimed play *M. Butterfly* exposes an implicit form, in which racial power disguises itself as instrumental sympathy, an unethical affect that is deployed to enhance cultural domination. In this essay, I offer an analysis of the affective strategy of Song, a male Chinese spy who disguises himself as a female opera singer to seduce the French diplomat Gallimard and attain military information on the Vietnam War. I contend that the reason that Song’s tactic works lies primarily in his being able to playfully appeal to Gallimard’s instrumental sympathy. This sympathy is a symptom of a particular type of Western masculine tendency, in which emotional ties are established solely to dominate and objectify the powerless other. The brilliance of Song’s strategy is encapsulated in his use of “cuteness,” a subclass of aesthetic category that, as Sianne Ngai (1971–) explains, always signifies an occurrence of power flow. Song’s performing of weakness and gradual submission to Gallimard caters to the diplomat’s desire and ensures the success of the tactic of soft subversion, allowing the audience to examine and expose the morbid form of social relation present in multicultural policies.

Perhaps more importantly for Hwang, the presence of the disingenuous instrumental sympathy in the multicultural assemblage raises serious doubts about the possibility and viability of the multicultural ideal. Scholars such as Dorothy Figueira (1955–), Charles Taylor (1948–), and Alain Touraine (1925–) have already warned us about the fragility of this conceptual framework of multiculturalism. Therefore, the second part of this essay analyzes the theoretical model of heterogeneous assemblage proposed by Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), Félix Guattari (1930–1992), and Manuel Delanda (1952–). This model emphasizes the essential role of sympathy in forming rhizomic connections that revitalize our understanding of assemblage by reemphasizing the practical

function of philosophy in the creative formation of “people to come.” In the face of the potential peril of instrumental sympathy, a dynamic and time-sensitive philosophy that constantly tests and exposes the power imbalance is essential as a practical apparatus for maintaining a healthy multiculturalism.

Instrumentality: the decadence of modern mind

As Paul Gilroy (1956–) observes in his polemic work *The Black Atlantic* (1993), the entangled relationships between culture, race, and nationality provokes a homogeneous tendency to restrain differences and formulate an identity:

Any satisfaction to be experienced from the recent spectacular growth of cultural studies as an academic project should not obscure its conspicuous problems with ethnocentrism and nationalism. Understanding these difficulties might commence with a critical evaluation of the ways in which notions of ethnicity have been mobilized, often *by default rather than design*, as part of the distinctive hermeneutics of cultural studies always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogeneous nation states.

(Gilroy: 5)

For Gilroy, the demand for political integration, regardless of its ideological affiliation, will always hide a form of cultural nationalism. Artistic and philosophical currents, such modernism or postmodernism, though formulated on the basis of contrasting motifs, share a similar desire to mold cultural sensibility in accordance with their own internal and intrinsic logic. In his effort to eliminate this patrimony from modernity, Paul Gilroy captures the Eurocentric element in modern Western thought: “If popular writers like Jürgen Habermas and Marshall Berman are to be believed, the unfulfilled promise of modernity’s Enlightenment project remains a beleaguered but nonetheless vibrant resource which may even now be able to guide the practice of contemporary social and political struggle” (46). The postmodern disposition, in Gilroy’s diagnosis, “holds no promise for those who retreat from the suggestion that all modes of life are irreconcilable and the related idea that any ethical or political position is as valid as any other” (46).

Hidden beneath the diverse efforts to implement a unified principle in our cultural sensitivity is the distorted image of the Enlightenment project,

which proposes a cultivated and transcendental rationality in man that aims to improve overall wellbeing. With the rise of the fanatic quest for pure linguistic and mathematic reason in logical positivism from the early 20th century onward, reason has gone astray from its original humanitarian blueprint that Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) had envisioned and is detached from the real though finite world it sets out to improve. In modern times, reason, as Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) remarks, functions not to inform our understanding of new concepts and ideas, but as a practical tool deployed to ensure that events take place in a rational and manageable order, therefore to search for and fulfill a series of goals. Horkheimer devotes an entire collection of essays to diagnosing the decadence of the modern mind, titled *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (2012) as a nod to the lost ingenuity Kant laid out in his three influential critiques. The opening of the preface reads

“Reason” for a long period meant the activity of understanding and assimilating the eternal ideas which were to function as goals for men. Today, on the contrary, it is not only the business but the essential work of reason to find means for the goals one adopts at any given time. And it is considered superstitious to think that goals once achieved are not in turn to become means to some new goal.

(Horkheimer: vii)

The decadence of reason lies in this instrumental turn from achieving the goal of understanding the phenomenological world to conjuring up new goals as well as a methodology to fulfil these goals in an age of aimlessness. Hence, reason is instrumental not to achieve the ideal of the Enlightenment but to create a set of goals and other tools for the purpose of continuing its very own existence. The disorientation of the modern mind is thus at stake, as the philosophical pursuits of knowledge and truth are no longer aimed at a prosperous life but are instead trapped in a loop of polishing the instrument for the sake of the instrument. Philosophy after the Enlightenment has gone awry in its misrecognition and misinterpretation of crucial components of Kant’s works, and its achievements over the past two centuries, for Horkheimer, signify an illusionary superficiality, constitutive of the collective decadence of modern intellectuals. Deeply disappointed, the Frankfurt School co-founder conceptualizes the juvenile ground of man in his time:

Where the word “man,” therefore, is still used in a more pregnant sense, it does not imply the rights of mankind. It does not stand for a theory of reason such as once was based on the unshakable belief that a just world could still be brought into existence. The word ‘man’ no longer expresses the power of the subject who can resist the status quo, however heavily it may weight upon him. Quite differently than in the context of critical philosophy, to speak of man today is to engage in the endless question of the ground of man and, since in ontological philosophy ground supplies direction, in the endless quest for an image of man that will provide orientation and guidance. (4)

Not only does Horkheimer’s analysis precede the critique of the reduction of difference that Gilroy puts forth, it also demonstrates the consequence of instrumental reason, that is, the vanishing of the ontological ground of individual man and the collective unconscious of resignation. At the center of Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason, which privileges identity over difference and hierarchy over diversity, is his discontent with the decaying historical process of post-Enlightenment philosophy. He also warns against the potential danger of this inclination, as the majority becomes programmed with the disoriented instrumental reason and wields the tyrannical and populist power to repress the powerless minority.

The subjugating power implied in instrumental reason penetrates society, victimizing individuality in the hope of homogeneous and orderly communities. Sociologist Alain Touraine describes the logic of identity in global communities: “It is true, in a sense, that we do live together at a planetary level, but it is also true that throughout the world there are more and more identity-based groupings and associations, sects, cults and nationalisms based on a common sense of belonging” (Touraine: 2). Touraine aptly reveals the social dilemma that a society unified to strive for equality for everyone faces, which is executing the power to annihilate individual subjectivity; the utopian state of living-together comes at the high price of compromises and repression of the relative minority, which in turn undermines the initial purpose of the society. Deeply ingrained in this line of thought is the instrumental disposition to draw an equation between cultural or racial identity and citizenship – as Gilroy argues about the misidentification of race, nation, and culture – a view that operates mostly in service of the authoritarian ruling class. Touraine then goes on to offer his solution: to construct a society devoid of cultural hegemony, a new affective

relation between social institutions and individuals should be established, one that enables citizens to recognize themselves as Subjects. He writes:

We will succeed in living together only if we recognize that our common task is to reconcile instrumental action and cultural identity and only if, therefore, we can construct ourselves as Subjects. We can live together only if the primary objective of our laws, institutions and forms of social organization is to safeguard our demand to live as the Subjects of our own experience. Without that central mediating principle, it is as impossible to reconcile the two sides of our experience as it is to square the circle. (158)

Touraine, therefore, proposes a humanitarian solution to counter the rigidity and coldness of the hegemonic power of instrumental reason, advocating for an affective strategy that allows individuals to enjoy *both* subjectivity and collectivity. This, on a more abstract level, responds to Horkheimer's concern about the decadence of the modern mind.

Affect trouble and cute power

The dualistic model of policy that Touraine discusses, which encompasses both rational and affective treatments of citizens for a thriving community, faces an epistemological issue: how can we know that affect will not be manipulated as instrumental and function as a tool to fulfill the desire of the powerful? Drawing on a central theme in David Hume's (1711–1776) philosophy, the primary objective of society is to shape our passions as grounded by familial partiality – a feature of human nature – into a form of connective and generous *sympathy* that can be extended to unrelated others. As Deleuze summarizes Hume's standpoint¹:

The problem [for Hume] is no longer how to limit egotisms and the corresponding natural rights but how to go beyond partialities, how to pass from a "limited sympathy" to an "extended generosity," how to stretch passions and give them an extension they don't have on their own. Society is thus seen no longer as a system of legal and contractual limitations but as an institutional invention: how can we

¹ For a more detailed analysis of the question of sympathy in Hume's philosophy, see Chapter 3 of Gilles Deleuze's *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*.

invent artifices, how can we create institutions that force passions to go beyond their partialities and form moral, judicial, political sentiments (for example, the feeling of justice)?

(Deleuze, 2002: 46–47)

If the appreciation or sympathy that the political or personal institutions extend to members of a minority become instrumental and even unethical because they aim to fulfill certain goals, Touraine’s plan may well have an unintended consequence of “cruel optimism,” formulated by Lauren Berlant (1957–): “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing [...] These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (Berlant: 1).

In the context of race and culture, the inclusive gesture may be a disguised ideological device that aims to affirm or intensify the already existent power structure, nationally or internationally. The sympathetic ties that extend from individual families to society in general may in fact be disingenuous and merely serve to manifest the given racial or cultural programming. Instrumental sympathy may sometimes appear as an effort to erase barriers and misunderstanding – the kind that Michael Luo goes through – and achieve a multicultural society in which everyone is a Subject. However, if it does not acknowledge its implicit power relationship, it can only enhance rather than resolve systematic dominance in a society. As Horkheimer discusses, this achieved goal becomes a means for realizing the next goal. Sympathy, as a social policy for multicultural cohabitation, therefore, contains the possibility of two types of will, as Edward Said (1935–2003) illustrates: a beneficent and ethical one that seeks “to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons” and a hegemonic and instrumental will that aims to “dominate for the purposes of control and external domination” (Said: xix).

Questions remain as to how to recognize this kind of self-serving instrumental sympathy and whether a strategy is available to counteract the dominant power. David Henry Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly* serves as a pertinent example of how to detect and counteract this tendency. By analyzing the strategies that Song uses to expose the Orientalist intention of Gallimard’s superficial sympathy

and eventually reverse the power structure, I argue that this soft subversion succeeds precisely because of the tactic of cuteness, an appeal to the powerful desire that exposes the instrumentality within.

Classical psychoanalytic theories tend to interpret desire as a form of lacking, a castrated and unavailable object that constantly demands fulfillment from the external, which would either be the same object in mind or a symbolic substitution that bears the same function.² However, one cannot clearly understand the desire of Gallimard – the French diplomat who gradually develops a maniac fascination with Song – using conventional psychoanalytic interpretations. David Eng (1967–) points this out in his detailed investigation of the phenomena of “racial castration” in Asian American literature, which uses the Freudian theory of fetishism that presupposes a male’s willful rejection of the lack of the penis in a female. Eng writes that

Classic fetishism, according to Freud, plays itself out along lines of sexual difference. The male fetishist refuses to acknowledge female castration by seeing on the female body a penis that is not there to see. In *M. Butterfly*, however, we encounter a strange reversal of this psychic paradigm, a curious reconfiguration of the fetish beyond what Freud’s essay explicitly offers. With Gallimard, we do not witness a denial of sexual difference and lack resulting in the projection onto the body of a female a substitute penis that is not there to see. Instead, we encounter the opposite, a “reverse fetishism,” so to speak: Gallimard’s blatant refusal to see on the body of an Asian male the penis that *is* clearly there for him to see.

(Eng: 150)

The purposeful avoidance of sexual encounter in the play invites us to seek another explanation for Gallimard’s fascination of Song. Through his soliloquy, we realize that his love and sympathy for Song as an object of desire functions instrumentally to realize and fulfill his repressed masculinity as a white male, which is considered insufficient by Western standards. What underlies the French diplomat’s hysterical attachment to the Asian cross-gender performer is a desire to subjugate power or restore the unfulfilled power by repetitiously affirming cultural difference and thereby racial hierarchy. Thus, Eng concludes

² An interesting account of the intensity of love and desire, ranging from normal attachment to hysteric passion, can be found in Reneta Salecl’s (1962–) work *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (2000).

that “Gallimard psychically castrates the Asian male, placing him in a position of lesser masculinity to secure for himself a position of greater masculinity” (151). The counter-strategies that Song employs, which purposefully cater to a need for masculinity, serve to practically test and expose the instrumental sympathy.

At the beginning of Act One, Hwang emphasizes Chinese tradition by describing Song as “a beautiful woman in traditional Chinese garb, [who] dances a traditional piece from the Peking Opera, surrounded by the percussive clutter of Chinese” (Hwang: 1). The repeated words of “Chinese” and “tradition” help to both introduce the protagonist as a narrative device and, perhaps more importantly, to introduce the Orientalist cues that later trigger Gallimard’s instrumental sympathy. This sympathy is triggered when Hwang arranges a transition of music from traditional Chinese Opera to the “Love Duet” of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, which celebrates the pure sacrifice of Asian females to Caucasian males, a cultural image constitutive of the Western perception of Asians. Curiously, the music played in the opening of the play, which goes from Eastern to Western and ancient to modern, echoes the logic of Song’s practical strategy for soft subversion. Song performs as a Chinese female who gradually loses her subjectivity to the Western male to make him put down his guard and unveil his instrumental sympathy. The softness of such a logic clearly appeals to Gallimard, and consequently we learn that he is “transfixed” when he first sees the performance:

Gallimard: But as she glides past him, beautiful, laughing softly behind her fan, don’t we who are men sigh with hope? We, who are not handsome, nor brave, nor powerful, yet somehow believe, like Pinkerton, that we deserve a Butterfly. She arrives with all her possessions in the folds of her sleeves, lays them all out, for her man to do with as he pleases. Even her life itself – she bows her head as she whispers that she’s not even worth the hundred yen he paid for her. He’s already given too much, when we know he’s really had to give nothing at all. (10)

What attracts Gallimard about Butterfly is the unconditional sacrifices she has made for Pinkerton, which display a thoroughly submissive mentality. As Gallimard admits, such traits that Westerners commonly associate with Asian females suit men like him especially well, as he is “not handsome, nor brave, nor powerful.” The willingness to devote oneself wholeheartedly to one’s lover creates

a power difference that compensates for his lack of masculinity in Western society and allows him to believe in a false image of power about himself, one that he is unable to achieve in Western society. Consider the imagined dialogue he has with a Western girl from his uncle's women's magazines: "Girl: I can't see you. You can do whatever you want. Gallimard: I can't do a thing. Why?" (12). For a Western man who lacks power and ranks himself on the lower end of the power hierarchy, his desire and masculinity are deeply repressed. His chief goal seems to be to restore his lack of power, and this goal precedes that of sexual freedom. We can therefore come to a better understanding of Eng's confusion about the lack of sexuality in Gallimard's fantasy: the object of desire here is not Song, but rather the maximized racial and power difference that Song is capable of bringing out as a submissive Oriental, male or female, which benefits Gallimard as he has an increased gender and racial power. His transfixed position while sitting in the audience does not signify a pure appreciation of Chinese traditional art or an affection for the performer as a Subject, as Touraine and Hume have suggested; on the contrary, Gallimard's extended attachment is instrumental, as its purpose is to satisfy his own yearning for power.

If the phallic failure of Gallimard and his exploration of instrumental sympathy to make up for his lack of masculinity were the main themes of the play, Hwang would have crafted a mere 10 pages of work. After all, his confession of his feeling for Song, as stated above, has already unveiled the working mentality of a disadvantaged Caucasian male that Eng endeavors to decode. What, then, is the narrative function of the rest of the play? Is Hwang simply trying to elongate our suspension until the closure, when the female Opera performer turns out to be male? The difficulty of interpreting the text, therefore, lies in accounting for the rest of the play, which introduces a perfect strategy for soft subversion.

When the two protagonists first meet, Gallimard expresses his appreciation of the submissive female character to Song, but, perhaps unexpectedly, he receives a cold rejection; Song responds with a strong sense of cultural dignity: "I will never do Butterfly again, Monsieur Gallimard. If you wish to see some real theatre, come to the Peking Opera sometime. Expand your mind" (17). This rebuttal cancels Gallimard's intention of "protecting her in my big Western arms" (18). However, upon their second conversation, we already witness

a change in Song's attitude, from pure coldness to a hint of affection: "We have always held a certain fascination for you Caucasian men, have we not?" (22). This phrase contains both a singular and a universal meaning: on the one hand, Song secretly conveys to Gallimard her affection, and on the other, the pronoun "we" entails an attempt to generalize from a personal case to all Asian women, catering to Gallimard's instrumental sympathy. In addition, we also notice the way Song characterizes herself as a "delicate Oriental woman," a phrase in which each word expresses a stereotyped weakness under Western eyes and that designates one fetish of Gallimard. The incremental increase in the intensity of Song's feeling for Gallimard has caught the diplomat's attention and affected him: "In my heart, I know she has... an interest in me. I suspect this is her way. She is outwardly bold and outspoken, yet her heart is shy and afraid. It is the Oriental in her at war with her Western education" (27). To further infatuate Gallimard, Song continues to relinquish part of her subjectivity as an independent Chinese woman to ensure the progression of subversion until the turning point when she utters: "Yes, I am. I am your Butterfly" (40). Such a statement overturns her initial firm rejection of Gallimard's objectification of Asian females as submissive belongings, and signifies the completion of the hatched character arc from an independent woman to an obedient and unthreatening wife, or what Gallimard calls "the perfect woman." It is precisely this change of attitude that convinces Gallimard and directly exposes his instrumental sympathy, as he reflects on his love to the audience: "It is possible that her stubbornness only made me want her more. That drawing back at the moment of my capitulation was the most brilliant strategy she could have chosen. It is possible. But it is also possible that by this point she could have said, could have done... anything, and I would have adored her still" (67). Therefore, Song's softness has paved the emotional condition for her later subversion of Gallimard, who is tethered completely to the power relation and the fulfillment of desire it brings to him: the soft strategy drives him to betray and divorce his wife and give away classified military information to Song, and eventually he is imprisoned.

By the end of the play, during Song's trial in Paris, she finally informs us of her true gender, and, more importantly, of the two rules that guided her when employing softness to seduce Gallimard. She tells the judge:

Song: [...] Rule One is: Men always believe what they want to hear. So a girl can tell the most obnoxious lies and the guys will believe them every time [...]

Song: Rule Two: As soon as a Western man comes into contact with the East – he's already confused. The West has sort of an international rape mentality towards the East. (82)

These two rules center on gender and orientalism respectively, but one implicit line of thought is also apparent here: the commonality of racism and masculine domination that prevails in ordinary and quotidian life. This is also discussed by Sharon Patricia Holland (1964–), “[...] racism orders some of the most intimate practices of everyday life, in that racist practice is foundational to making race matter” (Holland: 20). Patricia’s account lucidly helps explain Song’s strategy, as Song tries to destroy Orientalism from within by *following along* with the cultural rules at first, succeeding in this effort through the adept use of cuteness.

In her systematic inquiries into the three postmodern categories of marginal aesthetics – the zany, the interesting, and the cute – Sianne Ngai delineates how their ubiquitous presence in postmodern society shed new light on the conventional mode of the capitalist commodity production between production, circulation, and consumption. Cuteness is understood as a mediated affective relation that valorizes the unthreatening feature of objects, facilitating and perhaps accelerating the contemporary processes of commodity dissemination and reception. Through tenderness, smallness, and weakness, cuteness is capable of reviving a complex and of polarizing the response of consumers, in that it invites both aesthetics appreciation and an inclination for further aggressiveness. As Ngai observes

Revolving around the desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to the objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening, cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for “small things” but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further.

(Ngai: 3)

Interestingly, Ngai observes that the appealing nature of cuteness comes from its departure from traditional aesthetic concepts of fairness, symmetry, and balance and its reliance on the imbalanced power difference, “the experience

of cute depends entirely on the subject's affective response to an imbalance of power between herself and the subject" (54). Cuteness, therefore, expresses to the audience a feeling of attraction by incorporating tender and weak features in its appearance, activating a power consciousness that allows the audience to objectify and execute power upon the cute; Ngai goes on to expound that "In cuteness it is crucial that the object has some sort of imposed-on mien – that is, that it bears the look of an object unusually responsive to and thus easily shaped or deformed by the subject's feeling or attitude toward it" (65).

The logic of cuteness that Ngai theorizes as a postmodern aesthetic category saturated and practiced in our current mode of life also lends explanatory force to our understanding of Song's strategy of soft subversion. Through the gradual performative display of her delicacy as the racially castrated Chinese woman as well as through a dependency on Gallimard, Song manages to form an affective tie in the process of seduction and eventually exposes and debunks the instrumental sympathy that the diplomat seeks to restore.

The Challenge of Multiculturalism and the Task of Philosophy

The presence of instrumental sympathy, whose source may lie in the will to control, poses a constant threat to multicultural social policy. Through the character of Gallimard, we witness a social elite that manipulates the multicultural ideal to account for his own lack of masculinity, without having an authentic wish to establish a mutual understanding and appreciation of the cultural other. Besides, by setting Gallimard as the narrative focus of the plot, the play reveals the problematic of a contemporary multicultural agenda that fails to give voice to the powerless whom it purports to help. The instrumental tendencies – be it reason or sympathy – enhance rather than reduce the power structure between ethnicities and cultures, with a barrier of superficiality that keeps multiculturalism an unattainable fantasy. As Dorothy Figueira (1955–) remarks

In reality, multiculturalism only offers the illusion of victory over racism. It does not dignify anyone, as some have charged, because it does not address the issue of who has the power to determine what courses are taught and what requirements are established [...] contrary to its inflated aspirations, multiculturalism does not guarantee equality of opportunity or access to recourses for the disenfranchised.

Multiculturalism does not liberate anyone. In fact, the case can be made that it provides a smokescreen for societal and institutional unwillingness to change the academic situation of minorities.

(Figueira, 2008: 24)

Figueira's critique of multiculturalism has a twofold meaning that concerns both what Charles Taylor (1931–) calls the “misrecognition of others” (Taylor: 25) in the efforts to define multicultural identities and, because of the lack of voice among the “subalterns,” the tolerance and affirmation of such misrecognition. In a recent article, Figueira expounds the bureaucratic structure imbedded in the conception of multiculturalism in Western academia since the very beginning, “Multiculturalism claimed to re-envision the world from a decolonizing and antiracist perspective. Its rapid growth is attributable to a concerted effort on the part of administrators to appear more cutting-edge and inclusive” (Figueira, 2020: 17). What remains problematic, still, is the incorporation of continental theory – often circulated and taught in imperfect English translation – as elixir. The central issue Figueira discusses, thus, is the ongoing and troublesome one-dimensional power fluidity, which moves from the powerful to the powerless in a multicultural society, lacking the necessary reciprocity that allows the subalterns to speak. Instead of considering society as a structural organization, we need a pattern shift that turns society into a dynamic and non-hierarchical assemblage, a concept coined by Deleuze and Guattari.

A comprehensive account of the mechanism and logic of assemblage appears in Deleuze and Guattari's collaborative work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980); however, Deleuze already introduced the term “assemblage” during his dialogue with Claire Parnet in 1977 as designating a heterogeneous and complex way of arranging objects, expressions, and concepts so as to formulate new functions of collective bodies. According to Deleuze, assemblage denotes the dynamic composition of entities in various forms, initiated by the incessant desire that establishes relations and hence alters the cartography of the state of things in time. As he states

What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are

important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.

(Deleuze, 1977: 69)

What makes the concept of assemblage pertinent in conversations about multiculturalism is Deleuze's emphasis on sympathy as the source of connection between components. For Deleuze, the process of assemblage formation contains two simultaneous forces: one that tends to impose form and order to elements to create static strata and territory and the other that tends to decompose given structures and hierarchies to generate flows made solely of imperceptible molecules. Assemblage stresses the importance of difference and the state of coexistence in a social and cultural milieu; as Manuel Delanda comments: "using strata and assemblages as distinct categories allows one to stress their very important differences, even if it complicates the discussion of their mutual transformations" (Delanda, 2007: 6). The difficulty, we might surmise, lies in the endeavors needed to constantly practice the soft strategies that Song devises and expose and guard against the instrumental sympathy that prioritizes identity and unity over difference and diversity in a multicultural assemblage. To achieve such a goal, we are in need of a "people to come."

At the end of their last collaborative work, *What Is Philosophy?* (1991), Deleuze and Guattari express their hope for an arrival of an ultimate assemblage that lacks strata and a fixed structure—a plane of consistency that dissolves and transforms all subjectivation, power hierarchy, and arbitrary structures. Their quest is for the cultivation of a new vision that enables us to see things not in terms of static and fixated forms but in terms of lines, planes, imperceptible particles, and pure relations, such that we could no longer formulate any transcendental judgments and territories. It designates a moment when the Nietzschean eternal return has undergone exponential intensities and the reactive and passive tendencies of the world have been reevaluated. Awaited is a new people and new life, and they write,

In this submersion it seems that there is extracted from chaos the shadow of the "people to come" in the form that art, but also philosophy and science, summon forth: mass-people, world-people, brain-people, chaos-people – nonthinking thought that lodges in the three.

(Deleuze, Guattari: 218)

Drawing inspiration from Paul Klee's phrase "*c'est le peuple qui manque* (the people are missing)," Deleuze and Guattari express their utopian hope for an ideal state of assemblage that is already in the process of formation, as Ronald Bogue (1947–) further explicates: "The implication seems clear: in the present there is no people, and the people to come, *le peuple à venir*, is only possible in some future that has not yet arrived" (Bogue: 89). To speak of the new people, Deleuze and Guattari invite us to reconfigure the task of philosophy, as both a theoretical inquiry and a practical activity that help us see and create, respectively, new concepts and things. The striking feature of such a formulation is the inclusion of a temporality in philosophy that extends its force of thinking not only to the present moment but toward the future while synthesizing the past. As Paul Patton understands the meaning and function of philosophy in Deleuze and Guattari's metaphysical system, "Philosophy serves this goal by virtue of the manner in which the concepts it creates enable us to see things differently. New concepts provide new ways of describing the problems to which philosophical thought is a response, thereby point us toward new forms of solution" (Patton: 41).

Conclusion

This essay theorizes Song's soft strategy as an effective means to expose the racist will to dominate and subjugate – powered by the hazardous instrumental sympathy – in contemporary multicultural discourse and practice. More than a fictional attraction, the innovation in the exploration of softness makes Song an ideal philosopher that Deleuze and Guattari have sought to call forth to create new assemblages that do not prioritize racial and cultural power. The attainability of multiculturalism, therefore, depends on the degree of nearness to the state of assemblage, in which the mutual recognition of the culturally other, without pre-established prejudices, and mutual respect takes place for the sake of respect.

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Soft Subversion, Hard Exposition: Instrumental Sympathy and the Unattainable Multicultural Assemblage in *M. Butterfly*

Summary

This essay questions the possibility and validity of multiculturalism by referring to the diagnosis and exposition of instrumental sympathy – a modern affect with an orientalist inclination in disguise – brought up in David Henry Hwang’s masterpiece *M. Butterfly*. Multiculturalism remains frail and unachievable when the appreciation of an exotic culture is designed to fulfill a desire for appropriation. I also recognize Song’s soft strategy as an effective means to expose the racist will to dominate and subjugate – powered by the hazardous instrumental sympathy – in contemporary multicultural discourse and practice. More than a fictional attraction, the innovation in the exploration of softness makes Song an ideal philosopher that Deleuze and Guattari have sought to call forth to create new assemblages that do not prioritize racial and cultural power. The attainability of multiculturalism, therefore, depends on the degree of nearness to the state of assemblage, in which the mutual recognition of the culturally other, without pre-established prejudices, and mutual respect takes place for the sake of respect.

Keywords: comparative literature, multiculturalism, softness, instrumental sympathy, affect, assemblage, Asian American literature

Słowa kluczowe: literatura porównawcza, wielokulturowość, miękkość, sympatia instrumentalna, afekt, asamblaż, literatura azjatycko-amerykańska