The End of Ideology: The Poetry of Cathy Park Hong[1]

Brian Willems

Abstract

The poetry in Cathy Park Hong's *Empire Engine* (2012) is separated into three time-lines: the period of Westward Expansion in the United States, a contemporary story of fine art reproduction in China, and a futurist story of data workers in California. These three sections are united in their interrogation of the role of ideology in creating and sustaining an empire. I argue that the first timeline stages a representation of ideology in the traditional Althusserian sense, that the second timeline shows this representation as inadequate, and most importantly, that the final section suggests a new model for oppression. The key for the new model presented in the third timeline lies in the job the workers have: they work with data. The main argument is that the ruling class no longer maintains its power through the ownership of capital. Instead, as McKenzie Wark maintains in *Capital is Dead* (2019), this ruling class »owns and controls information« (Wark 5). The owning and controlling of information is no longer capitalism, »but something worse« (29). Following on Wark, I argue that this use and abuse of data changes ideology in a fundamental manner. Rather than having a world from which an individual can feel more or less estranged in an Althusserian sense, the new reign of data suggests that estrangement is the fundamental experience of the world. In other words, there is no world to feel estranged from, thus leading to ideology; rather, the feeling of estrangement is already the fundamental experience of our data-driven reality. While in Hong's book this new model is located in the future, the end of the essay

---

argues that a similar state is brought about not only by our data-driven world, but also pandemics such as that caused by COVID-19, which are part of our time now.

IDEOLOGY

The first section of Cathy Park Hong's *Engine Empire* illustrates the »traditional« or Althusserian reading of ideology. This is done, at least in part, in order to set the stage for the changes to come in the second and third parts of the book. This first section takes place during the American westward expansion of the 19th century. There are two parts. The first is titled »Fort Ballads,« and it concerns the violence of westward expansion.

The first line of the book, from the poem »Ballad of the Range,« makes the Althusserian reading of ideology clear in the way that the characters turn away from a world that they do not want to be a part of and need to invent a reason for doing so. The first line goes:

> The whole country is in a duel and we want no part of it. (Hong 2012: 19)

The duel referred to is the American Civil War, and the protagonists are running away from it rather than fighting in it. This simple gesture is taken as an example of Althusser's definition of ideology. The basic idea is that there is a world, that of the Civil War, that the men in the poem cannot handle. This world is so terrible that the men cannot live in it, which is seen by their wanting »no part of it« in this quote.

More specifically, this initial scene from Hong's book corresponds to part of Althusser's first thesis on ideology as presented in his 1968 essay »Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.« He presents three theses on this topic in his essay. In the first, Althusser states that »Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence« (Althusser 256). The real conditions of existence for the protagonists of the poem are the conditions of the Civil War.

Two different imaginary relationships to the conditions of the Civil War are offered as a consequence of the protagonists being unable to live in their world. The first is the flimsy excuse that they »ain't got time to enlist« (Hong 2012: 19). This excuse is hyperbolically weak and seems to merely show that they are grasping at straws for justifying their escape. The second imaginary relationship

is seen as they start heading in »the wrong di-rection« (ibid.), meaning out west, away from the war. As the men leave, they pass by many horrific images of the real conditions of existence, such as »forts ready to be sawed into colt towns,« other forts abandoned by Southerners who »couldn't let their grudges aside and mauled / each other to blood strops,« and men who »yoke themselves to state« (ibid.) as soldiers. Instead of staying with this horror, the men pass through it in a romantic daze which represents the second »imaginary relationship« they have to the world. The men are described as »brothers« who are »heading through fields of blue rye« on their way to the »boomtowns« of the west (ibid.). Although »fields of blue rye« can be taken as a neutral description of landscape through which the brothers are passing, its juxtaposition with the horrors just seen frames the fields as an imaginary and romantic escape from the world around them.

   Louis Althusser is a key reference here because he asks why is it that individuals need an imaginary cocoon to protect themselves from the real conditions of existence. He offers two false solutions and then proposes his own. The first false solution is that, starting in the 18th century, Priests or Despots thought up »Beautiful Lies« so that their followers would obey them while thinking they were obeying God (Althusser 256). The second false solution, that of Feuerbach and Marx, is related to the alienation of labor, which we can briefly state here to mean that the product of the labor of an individual has no relation to their own lives. Working on a farm that produces food is less alienating than working in a factory that produces the plastic wrapping for shipping USB cords. Thus, according to Althusser, this false solution posits that »men make themselves an alienated (= imaginary) representation of their conditions of existence because these conditions of existence are themselves alienating« (257).

   Yet both of these solutions are argued as being false. In their place Althusser states that it is not the actual real conditions of existence that cause an individual to create an ideology, but rather an individual's *relation* to those conditions:

> It is this relation which is at the center of every ideological, i.e. imaginary, representation of the real world. It is this relation that contains the »cause« which has to explain the imaginary distortion of the ideological representation of the real world. Or rather, to leave aside the language of causality, it is necessary to advance the thesis that it is *the imaginary nature of this relation* which underlies all the imaginary distortion that we can observe (if we do not live in its truth) in all ideology. (ibid.)

Thus in the example of the worker above, a farmer who raises food necessary for life can still be immersed in an ideology if their relation to their work is an unsatisfactory one. For example, perhaps the farmer dreams of being a florist and thus feels alienated by doing any non-floral labor.

The fact that the first part of *Engine Empire* is set amid 19th-century westward expansion in the United States is not an accident. The political ideology of the mid-1830s to the mid-1840s became the guiding force for much of the violence that took place. As Reginald Horsman argues in *Race and Manifest Destiny*, the ideology of American expansion was developed in relation to the real conditions of the conflict with American Indians. Manifest Destiny is connected to the belief that »a superior American race was destined to shape the destiny of much of the world. It was also believed that in their outward thrust Americans were encountering a variety of inferior races incapable of sharing in America's republican system and doomed to permanent subordination or extinction« (Horsman 6). Confrontation with American Indians became the first test of this belief (103). The truth was that entire groups were being wiped out. The *relation* to this fact became the ideology of *shaping the destiny* of much of the world. Thus images of Indians as noble savages was not as important as seeing them as improvable beings »who could and should be taught the virtues of the American way of life« (105). The main component of this myth, however, was that »only the American Anglo-Saxons could bring the political and economic changes that would make possible unlimited world progress« (189), reasoning which was also used to justify the enslavement of Africans (3).

In the first section of Hong's *Engine Empire*, the main character Jim shows part of the violent nature of how the ideology of Manifest Destiny works. As the men in the first poem make their way west, they come across a destitute fort and kidnap one of the young boys inside to take with them (Hong 2012: 20). This boy is Jim, who shows an innate talent for dominating his surroundings by shooting prey, and the men assume that »this queer / piper can tame this fickle, harrowed land« (ibid.). In »Ballad of Infanticide,« Jim tells the story of his parents. His father was an American Indian killer and his mother a Comanche guide. However, when his father left his mother for another woman, his mother killed the other woman and Jim's brother before Jim was able to flee. The men learn one thing of note from this story, that »Jim's a two-bit half-breed« (21), which on the one hand puts him in a position of being an even more violent supporter of Manifest Destiny rather than having any kind of sympathy for those it destroyed,[2] and on the other makes him, as Jen Hedler Phillis notes in her reading of the poem, »Both victim and victor of this imperial violence« (Phillis 146). In addition, Phillips directly ties Hong's work to Manifest Destiny when she says that, »put in the context of the necessary violence that allowed for Manifest Destiny, we see that,

---

2   Jim is both a "half-breed" and less merciful toward the Indians than the brothers that kidnapped him. A similar logic is represented in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *This Earth of Mankind* (1980), in which the "half-breed" Robert acts "more oppressive" toward the native Javanese than the white Dutch plantation owners.

like the victims of empire, the people who originally clear the way for it will be disavowed, shunted to margins« (144).

The story of Jim and the brothers encompasses both aspects of Manifest Destiny that Phillis mentions. First, Jim is an unapologetic image of violence, while the brothers take on the role of disavowing the rage that Jim enacts. In relation to Althusser's theses on ideology, Jim is a pure representative of the real conditions of the violence of Manifest Destiny, and it is the brothers that follow him who develop an ideology in order to justify this violence. Jim is the first one to kill an American Indian, a Miwok, who was trying to steal the brothers' mules. The men then tie the murdered man's body to the back of their mules and drag »his gutted body, tailed / by a lariat of vultures who peck him raw« (24). The Miwok's sister follows them, begging for the body to mourn. Eventually the men give in and allow her to have it. Jim, on the other hand, has no room for mercy. »Our Jim's gone husk. / He warns of us our weakness« (ibid.) is how the poem ends.

Jim is just an empty »husk« that kills, »No thought flickers behind his linseed eyes« (24). He is a vacant shell though which the violence of American expansion is funneled. His mindless violence is mirrored by the mindless work he and the brothers see a number of miners performing. The mine is »drained of its ore« (25) although the miners are still there; they »dig / and dig« (ibid.), gestures which, as Phillips argues, »position meaningless, fruitless labor as the real source of imperial power« (144).[3]

Jim's violence is not only directed at American Indians, however. Once the men arrive in California, he also murders French settlers (31) and retired lawmen (33). The brothers are excited that Jim is doing all this violence for them:

> We scream: Do it boy! Shoot!
> He aims cold, slays them all,
> exciting us to no end.
> He says: I'm done finishing your games. (31)

The emptiness of Jim's actions reflects how Jim does none of the internal work of ideology himself. That's what »I'm done finishing your games« can mean in the quote above: Jim is a figure of the real circumstances of westward expansion. The »games« the brothers play, as seen in the way that they turned away from the Civil War and the destruction it causes to the pretty fields of the west, develop an ideology out of an inability to face the violence they are actually causing. As Phillips

---

3   These empty gestures foreshadow Ling Ma's novel *Severance* (2018), in which people infected with the Shen Fever are doomed to endlessly repeat the gestures ingrained on them in both work and home. And this is not a frivolous connection, since in *Minor Feelings* Hong mentions Ma's work (Hong 2020: 57).

point out, the poem represents first »the brutality of primitive accumulation, then, the disavowal of violence« (142).[4] The »games« the brothers play represent how »the brothers imagine that they can escape this force« (144), the games are the »weakness« that Jim warns the brothers of after killing the Indian: the weakness of ideology in relation to the real circumstances it cannot »see«

At the end of this section the brothers learn that there is a bounty on Jim's head because he has overstepped his bounds and murdered a high constable. However, the brothers are unable to poison him as they plan, and Jim kills one of the brothers (Hong 2012: 35). It is Jim himself who sings »I'm tiring, I'm tiring« (36), although even in his last moments »His mind's still spitting, knifing with skill, / his victimizing intrinsic within his mind, / grinding within his skin« (ibid.). And then, as he walks though the »shadowed plain« (37) of death, which is filled with insects, he has a moment of reaching out to his mother and sister, »with the first feelings of want« (ibid.), perhaps asking for forgiveness. But they recognize him as the »killer outlaw« (ibid.) that he is, and they leave him to his death. The final image is of even the insects flying »farther off« (38), leaving Jim to go along the »denuded earth« (ibid.), presumable stripped by the violence of westward expansion. In this way Jim is a figure that shows how westward expansion and eventual settlement in the west were part of the same violence and ideology. His death shows, as one reviewer said of the poems, that »The American empire, it is made clear, will continue to grow, east to west, north to south, and everywhere beyond« (Alessandrelli 177-8). In the next section of Hong's book we will see a similar process take place. However, this time the Boomtown is Shangdu, China, which is the hometown to a massive industry of artists endlessly reproducing famous paintings by the likes of Van Gogh and Renoir, their gestures reminiscent of the miners who are still going through the empty gestures of their job long after the mines have given up all their ore. The difference in the second section, however, is that Althusser's description of the structure of ideology is seen to be lacking.

THE END OF IDEOLOGY

The second part of *Engine Empire* is titled »Shangdu, My Artful Boomtown!« and is itself divided into three parts. The first is a series of poems written from the perspective of a family member who has stayed behind in the village while their brother has gone to the boomtown city of »lighspeed Shangdu« (Hong 2012: 42) to work. The second part is a series of short prose poems, some of which describe the life of the brother in Shangdu, He is an artist making reproductions of famous

---

4   This disavowal can be seen in how once the brothers reach the Boomtown in the west, the land it rests on is reclaimed by Mexican Indians.

paintings. The third part contains a number of different poems, including a sales pitch for the world's largest golf resort. The combined effect of these three parts is to challenge the reading of an ideology of relations as presented in the first part on westward expansion, although what replaces this ideology is left for the last section of Hong's book.

The location of the boomtown in Shangdu serves multiple functions in the poems. First, the real-world city of Shangdu is now only a set of ruins, and so it functions as a place of fantasy in Hong's book. The real city of Shangdu was originally built during the Mongol-Yuan period (1271–1368) as the summer capital for Qubilai Qa'an, and it functioned as one of the twin political centers (along with its sister city of Dadu) until it was destroyed by the forces of Zhu Yuan-zhang, founder of the Ming dynasty (Chan 1-2). However, to western readers the city is probably most well-known through the Anglicization of its name into Xanadu, popularized by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem »Kubla Kahn« (1818). Hong references Coleridge in the poems, which is discussed below, but for this initial analysis it is important to note that the contemporary lightspeed boomtown of Shangdu is obviously fictitious, and thus disrupts the role of the imagination in the traditional explanation of ideology. This disruption takes place in the following manner. If ideology is the imaginative rationale developed because of one's relationship to their actual circumstances, then the imaginative city of Shangdu is meant to intensify the fantasy to such a degree that it feels false, or too obvious to believe in, and can thus no longer be used as a plausible rationale for dealing the real circumstances of life.

The hyperbolic fantasy of Shangdu comes to the fore in the second part of this section, that in which, at least in part, the brother of the family describes his life as an artist making copies of paintings by Rembrandt (and later Renoir), which he hears »are sold to rich town houses and hotels in a place called Florida« (Hong 2012: 47). The first prose poem is »Of Lucky Highrise Apartment 88.« The builders were in such a rush to finish it that they left the last wall unfinished, so now it is place where drunks and suicides fall to their deaths (46). In another poem, other highrises are seen to have their problems too: »Highrise 11 has no heat, Highrise 22 lacks floors, Highrise 33 has no spigots, Highrise 44 lacks windowpanes, Highrise 55 lacks stove ranges, while Highrise 66 is lopsided« (53). And that is not all. In »Of the Millennial Promenade Along the River,« a fried prawn vendor is executed by city officials after he tilts the surveillance camera that was pointing at his stall up into the sun (47). In »Of Future Wireless Highrise 110,« the voice of a lone protesting female factory worker is drowned out by the rerun of a soap on TV (51). And in »Of the World's Largest Multilevel Parking Garage,« the striking crane operators that lifted vehicles in and out of the garage are disappeared, leaving boats, busses, and even helicopters that were still attached to their cranes floating in the air while they rust in the rain (ibid.).

Two aspects of these descriptions come forth. First, these descriptions are *too much* in the sense that they are hyperbole. A highrise without a wall and helicopters left stranded by cranes at a multilevel parking garage are satirical images that are extrapolations of contemporary problems. This leads to the second aspect of the descriptions, which is that the structure and issues of Shangdu show that it is actually a »fictionalized Shenzen, China« (Hollister 264), although it might be more accurate to say it is a fictionalization of one of Shenzen's suburbs, Dafen Village, which is known for its art reproduction firms.

Shenzen is an important location because it was one of four »Special Economic Zones,« or SEZs, created by then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping in 1979.[5] These zones are usually seen as a »graduated sovereignty« experiment in capitalism within a country organized around central planning (Xu 43). However, in *Capital is Dead*, McKenzie Wark argues that the changes Deng's zones brought about were actually »something more akin to the Japanese rather than the so-called neoliberal model, of suppressing wages and funneling the surplus into export-led growth« (Wark 117). Such zones offer »a cocktail of enticements and legal exemptions that are sometimes mixed together with domestic civil laws, sometimes manipulated by business to create international law, and sometimes adopted by the nation in its entirety« (Easterling 33). The architectural design of these new zones in China was based on the New York rather than Los Angeles model, meaning they have »high densities expressed architecturally through many towers, some filled with offices and others with apartments« (James-Chakraborty 473). However, the extreme forms that the architecture of the Highrises takes on in Hong's book are more reflective of an offshoot of SEZs, the rapid building which has taken place in Chinese »boomtowns« such as the Wujin district of Changzhou, in which overbuilding has given rise to »ghost cities« which have extremely low occupancy levels (Mingye 75-7).

The hyperbuilding of Chinese ghost cities and SEZs are, at least in part, reflective of an ideology which has lost any viable relation with the real circumstances of the world. To be confronted with the thousands of empty apartments of a ghost city such as Wujin is to observe an ideology unable to cope with the world (or what is called »the earth,« below). The real conditions of dwelling can often be easy to create: the physical construction of homes. However, the ideology of a positive relation to these homes, meaning a feeling of inhabitation made by the

---

5   However, the history of Free Economic Zones is quite long, starting with the development of free trade ports, of which Delos in Greece is thought to have been the first. Deng's version of the Special Economic Zone was designed to "turbocharge zone growth" (Easterling 35) as part of his Open Door economic policies. In addition, Shenzhen is a special kind of SEZ, since the zone makes up the entire city, including both business and residential areas, instead of being a special zone within another district (27-36).

presence of hospitals, parks, schools, and other social institutions and amenities, is not enough to »fool« the expected number of people to move into these structures (Shepard 67). The empty cities function as physical manifestations of a failed ideology. Imagination has gotten out of control, and clearly has no connection to the reality of housing needs. The location of the second section of Hong's book in such a city does not come about by accident.

Yet Hong's poems do not just take place in an SEZ in general, but rather in a specific city, Shangdu, or Xanadu. Samuel Taylor Coleridge is specifically addressed in »A Little Tête-à-tête«: »Coleridge, it is me, your affectionate friend! / Might I interrupt you from your compositions, for a little tête-à-tête?« (Hong 2012: 57), the poem begins. In her essay »Bad English,« Hong calls this poem »a salesman's pitch« companion poem to Coleridge's »Kubla Kahn« (Hong 2020: 100).[6] This pitch can be seen in how Coleridge's poem, which popularized the name of »Xanadu,« is interrupted by the speaker who claims to be selling something even more fantastic:

> We have shattered new frontiers with our 14 golf courses.
> A dexterous harmony of manmade and natural hazards,
> fairway glades surrounded by leafwhelmed mountains
> of tinted tallow trees and pars graced with stately flame
> throated birds-of-paradise. (Hong 2012: 57)

This golf resort, which has not been finished, is even larger than the current actual largest resort in the world, Mission Hills Shenzhen, located in the same Chinese SEZ discussed above. The resort described in the sales pitch in Hong's poem has 14 courses (compared to Mission Hills Shenzhen's 12) and includes other fantastic elements: »a 150 yard beach bunker – sand imported from / the sucrose beaches of the Caribbean!« (ibid.), »manmade lakes, the water dyed a cool, hushed slate« (ibid.). Yet the resort is actually similar to another project, the Highrises described previously, because both remain unfinished. With the golf resort, there are no golf carts yet, since they are waiting for the latest generation of »multiple-passenger rough-terrain utility vehicles« (ibid.) to arrive next month. In their place is physical labor in the form of caddies, such as »the compact little man in the plaid shorts« (58) named Xiao, who scowls and is warned »*Pig! Better not stir shit up! I'm watching you!*« (ibid.).

This vision of a 14-course golf resort replaces Coleridge's original vision of Xanadu, as the speaker indicates in addressing the poet:

---

6   Hong uses the term "bad English" to describe the way she "inappropriately" combines a large variety of languages and dialects in her work, as most clearly seen in *Translating Mo'um* (2002) and *Dance Dance Revolution* (2007), the latter of which features over 300 languages and dialects.

> Dash off? Why must you dash off?
> To dash down what you just dreamed? But my friend,
> I've already dreamed up this Xanadu, (ibid.)

As indicated by the scowling Xiao, who must carry the golf bags of the rich while the resort waits for the arrival of high-tech golf carts, this imagined world is not perfect. In fact, it seems to be over-reaching. Too many courses, too much high-tech, and what is left are the sore shoulders of the angry working class like Xiao. Again, this image of the golf resort shows a failure of the imagination, a concept which is central for Coleridge. Rather than fancy, which Coleridge defines as the rational organization of sensory input, imagination is spontaneous, something which springs »instantly out of the chaos of elements or shattered fragments of memory« (Coleridge 206) and which is then given some form by the imaginer. Although this reading avoids the complexity of Coleridge's thought,[7] the crux of the poem is to show this spontaneous generation of elements as flawed. The generation of ghost cities and SEZ golf resorts is spontaneous in the sense that it is not well-connected to ideology. As Shoshana Zuboff argues in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, this kind of misapplied data management »is a domain plagued by hyperbole, where projections frequently outrun actual results (Zuboff 203).

What Hong's poem foregrounds is the failure of imagination in its role in ideology. If the function of imagination is to ease an individual's relation to difficult real circumstances, then imagination in the second section of *Engine Empire* is so extreme, so out of tune with the difficulties of the present, that it is ineffective in its palliative role of ideology. This is why Coleridge is told that there is no use in dashing off to finish his poem. Xanadu has already been imagined, and on a greater scale than he could ever conceive. There is a difference though, and that is that imagine is seen as a destructive influence rather than positive. Highrises missing a whole side and expensive golf course missing carts are some of the least egregious examples of the destruction that the over-eager imagination can cause.

SMART SNOW AND COVID-19

The last section of Hong's book is different from the proceeding sections in a crucial manner, and the rest of this essay is used to bring that manner forth. In short, ideology (as defined above) supposes a world that an individual cannot accept, and thus that individual forms an ideology to defend herself from it. For example, school

---

7   Two classic examples of work on the imagination in Coleridge are I.A. Richard's *Coleridge on Imagination* (1962) and J. Robert Barth's *The Symbolic Imagination* (1977). For a more contemporary approach, see Evan Gottlieb's chapter "Coleridge, Nature-Philosophy, and Process Ontology" in his *Romantic Realities* (2016).

can be a cruel institution, but the ideology of »it will be worth it in the end when you get a good job« makes it bearable. The third section of Hong's book is different. It takes place in a future California in which the »new reign« of data collapses the difference between the world of »real circumstances« and the world of »ideology.« The possibility of escaping the world through the imagination of ideology has been eradicated. The method of this eradication is vividly expressed by a »smart snow« which is always falling and which can penetrate not just individuals' homes, but their minds: »You feel the smart snow / monitoring you, / uploading your mind so anyone / can access your content« (Hong 2012: 70). Smart snow sees all and even understands all, both externally and internally, in everyone's lives. The relationship to smart snow is one in which there is no escape from an oppressive world through the imagination of ideology. The smart snow is pervasive and thus blocks the characters of the poems from experiencing alienation. In other words, alienation, and the ideology it engenders, would be a relief, a relief that is unavailable (cf. Willems 44-5). Below, the pervasiveness of the smart snow is read along with the inescapable contagiousness of viruses such as COVID-19. In Hong's book, the time of smart snow is in the future, while viruses such as COVID-19 are part of our time now.

One reason there is no »other world« from which to separate our lives with ideology is that surveillance and control have penetrated our homes in the form of social media apps, cookies on our computers, and Alexia listening to everything else. This is what Shoshana Zuboff, in *The Age of Surveillance Captialism*, describes as

> the everywhere, always-on instrumentation, datafication, connection, communication, and computation of all things, animate and inanimate, and all processes—natural, human, physiological, chemical, machine, administrative, vehicular, financial. Real-world activity is continuously rendered from phones, cars, streets, homes, shops, bodies, trees, buildings, airports, and cities back to the digital realm, where it finds new life as data ready for transformation into predictions, all of it filling the ever-expanding pages of the shadow text. (Zuboff 202)

This level of surveillance is unavoidable, and it is one thing the ubiquity of the smart snow represents, along with the prevalence of algorithms more generally, as well as the damage to the world we are undertaking in the Anthropocene.[8] What makes this world different from the one described by Althusser is that this world is not something separate from us that we can have an ideological relationship to. Instead, we are already a part of this world, and the world *shapes* the way that we thinking about it, rather than our thinking being *removed* from such a world

---

8   Zuboff's work is part of a growing literature on data gathering, analysis and use in relation to the social realm, including Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016), Safiya Umoja Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), and Caroline Criado Perez's *Invisible Women* (2019).

or, in Althusser's second thesis on ideology, informed by our feelings about our relationship to that world. As Hong's work shows, we are actually living within a world that can be described by Alfred Sohn-Rethel's concept of »real abstraction« in which, to put it briefly here, the ability to think rationally about a situation (a form of ideology) is itself an abstraction born out of the world of capitalist commodification (Sohn-Rethel 20). This is a world, as Gean Moreno argues, »in which abstraction seems less a thing without reference – as modernists used to boast about certain paintings and morphologies – than the ultimate reference of everything« (Moreno 2). In short, as the second part of *Engine Empire* shows, the ability to escape reference to the real world is ruined. It is ruined by the extreme devastation of the world which does not let us escape the world. If only our world were easy enough to allow ideology to take place.

The third part of Hong's book is called »The World Cloud.« This title indicates not only the all-encompassing nature of the »cloud« of data about our lives, but also the conflagration of the »real circumstances« of the world and the »virtual imagination« of data. Both have become one. The first poem in this section is titled »Come Together,« which indicates the joining of the two. The poem begins:

> Snow like pale cephalopods drifts down
> as it melts into our lapels we are all connected
> into a shared dream where we
> don't need our heirloom
> mouths. (Hong 2012: 65)

The snow is actually a means of data collection and surveillance. It connects all people by seemingly surveilling them equally. Yet there is another element present in this quote, and it relates to the imagination. Everyone is part of the same, shared dream, and the old ways of talking about things (»heirloom / mouths«) are no longer needed. Here, imagination, at least as it was once known, is abandoned, and something else has usurped its position.

The poem continues by describing how the imagination is rendered useless. Imagination used to be about fundamental change: »In imagining the future, / we once desired a ziggurat to crumble…« (ibid.), but now the smart snow has ended all that.[9] However, the end of imagination does not mean that nothing can

---

9   A view which reflects the idea that alternative futures can no longer be imagined since all revolutionary forms of economic expression have already been subsumed by neoliberal strategies (Shaviro 2013; cf. Willems 2018: 74-6) and comes from Fredric Jameson's idea that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson 76) which is expanded by Mark Fisher into the idea of capitalist realism, which describes "a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (Fisher 16; cf Willems 2015: 55).

be imagined, but rather that, as with the 14-course golf course described in the second section of the book, everything can be imagined, but that everything has no relation to the real world: »now my imagination can be any nation I want« (66). Everything can be imagined, although this imagination no longer brings down ziggurats. The question that remains is, why not?

One approach to an answer is to examine some of the initial thought related to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The journal *Identities*, based at the University of Skopje, has released a series of short pieces addressing the pandemic. In a contribution titled »A World is Ending,« Levi Bryant addresses the way that the way the virus spreads has taken away our world (read ideology) and left us with the earth (read real circumstances). Of course »world« and »earth« are used in a philosophical sense, but we can briefly state here that the assumed familiarity of the world has been replaced by the actual dangers of the earth. For example, *before*, visiting a grocery store was a trip concerned with prices, lines, and parking (the world). *Now* it is a chance not only for the death of one's self but for infecting others when one returns home (the earth). The world is that which we assumed was familiar, even safe. The earth is the actual manner in which the things around us can be connected. The earth is always a threat because objects can always be connected to other objects in ways we either forget or ignore when we are ensconced in our world.

This is not to say that COVID-19 is a special case, however. Many people in the world live much more on the earth than in the world. War, disease, abuse, racism, famine, poverty, homelessness, and many other terrible situations force one to be on earth in a way that Bryant is only beginning to describe. And yet what the virus is doing is putting groups of people in a state of precariousness to which they had probably assumed they were removed: »As they are thrown out of work and suffer the disease, the 'middle class' discover that they have more in common with the homeless person than with the billionaire« (Bryant). It is not that the world is splitting apart, but rather that it is splitting apart along new seams.

This is why Bryant can say that »A world is ending« rather than *the* world is ending (ibid.). Bryant describes his world as starting to look like the less familiar *there*, the place where war, disease, abuse, famine, poverty, homelessness, and other situations were assumed to be happening. To describe this feeling, there is a reference to the Open, a term from Martin Heidegger that is taken up by Giorgio Agamben. In literary studies, a more familiar term is *worldview*, meaning the input of the world that one is able to take into account. When I open the door to my house I assume no one is standing on the other side of it pointing a gun at me. Somewhere I know it could happen, just as I know that a plane, right now, could be falling from the sky and heading for the building in which I'm writing. But I live like it will not happen. This plane is not a part of my worldview.

What is different with the virus is that it is not that the door could or could not hide a murderer on the other side of it, but rather that the door itself has become the vehicle for murder. We see this in how the packaging in the grocery store and the air between two people that they breathe have become deadly. In this way »Death lurks everywhere and the friendly objects of the world are now all threatening« (Bryant). The only difference is that everything on the whole earth, all at once, is becoming threatening. We are finally learning about the real circumstances we have always been living in.

The smart snow in Hong's poems represents this loss of world and a confrontation with earth. In one poem, »You feel the smart snow monitoring you, / uploading your mind so anyone can access your content« (Hong 2012: 70), and in another,

> smart snow has reached
> total density, drifting even inside
> the hospice so you can hear
>
> the gray-eyed pulse
> of comas, private as a cargo of stones
> being dragged across the arctic. (73)

This »total density« indicates that the smart snow has penetrated everywhere, even into the most private of places. The snow has penetrated the imagination also, so that even attempts to imagine a different future have already been corrupted, closed off by its pervasiveness:

> landscapes overlaid
> with golden apps and speculation
> nudging hope like the sham
>
> time machinist who returns from
> the future, convincing
> everyone with his doctored
> snapshots of restored
>
> prosperity… (74)

Landscapes overlaid with golden apps sounds like an invocation of ideology as it once was: the relationship to the real circumstances of the world mediated by a rosy-glasses phone app. However, »nudging hope« can refer to the stripping of hope from the future both by the »speculation« of long-term debt obligation and the manner in which the time machinist comes from the future with fake images of a prosperous future. The time machinist is showing a future already devoid

of imagination, since the images are fake. Imagination has been shut down. The speaker is simply stuck in a present devoid of any ability to imagine the future.

I argue that the use and abuse of data that the smart snow represents changes ideology in a fundamental manner. Rather than having a world from which an individual can feel more or less estranged in an Althusserian sense, the new reign of data suggests that estrangement is the fundamental experience of the world. One's inner and outer lives are already recorded and processed. There is no escape. This has consequences for ideology because in this new world of data, there is no world to feel estranged from; rather, the feeling of estrangement is already the fundamental experience. While in Hong's book this new model is located in the future, the end of the essay argues that a similar state is brought about not only by our data-driven world, but also pandemics such as that caused by COVID-19, which are part of our time now.

But what replaces ideology? The flatness of the earth, the scary feeling that we have nothing other than the objects around us. This reading can be used to make sense of the final poem in *Engine, Empire*, which functions as a kind of epilogue. »Fable of the Last Untouched Town« at first seems like a Luddite return to a land untouched by modern technology. But that is not quite what the poem seems to be saying. The first stanza provides a key to understanding how there is no more world, only the earth:

> We are the only hole in a world of light.
> No lamps grid our streets, no cars flash their headlights.
> When sun sets, we have no choice
> but to resign ourselves. (89)

Rather than being some kind of return to nature, the last poem of *Engine, Empire* signifies being resigned to the earth. This is in fact the best relation we can have to the real circumstances of our lives. Everything else is ideology.

WORKS CITED

Alessandrelli, Jeff. »*Engine Empire* by Cathy Park Hong.« *Prairie Schooner*, vol. 86, no. 3 (2012): 177-179.

Althusser, Louis. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. London: Verso, 2014.

Barth, J. Robert. *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

Bryant, Levi. »A World is Ending.« *Identities*, April 3, 2020. Internet: https://identities-journal.edu.mk/index.php/IJPGC/announcement/view/21?fbclid=IwAR3M-ce3ny1uoYptruUjRhgiob-ql-zvdke3sGqPqJt62MGNaMECTwkemoCQ.

Chan, Hok-Lam. »Exorcising the Dragon: A Legend About the Building of the Mongolian Upper Capital (Shangdu).« *Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2011): 1-32.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Anima Poetae*. Ed. E.H. Coleridge. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895.

Easterling, Keller. *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*. London: Verso, 2016.

Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Ropley, UK: Zero Books, 2009.

Gottlieb, Evan. *Romantic Realities: Speculative Realism and British Romanticism*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2016, 60-98.

Grant, Andrew. »Hyperbuilding the Civilized City: Ethnicity and Marginalization in Eastern Tibet.« *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 50 (2018): 573-555.

Hollister, Susannah. »*Dance Dance Revolution* by Cathy Park Hong; *Engine Empire* by Cathy

Park Hong.« *Chicago Review*, vol. 57, nos. 1/2 (2012): 259-266.

Hong, Kathy Park. *Dance Dance Revolution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007.

---. *Translating Mo'um*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2002.

---. *Engine Empire*. New York; London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012.

---. *Minor Feelings: A Reckoning on Race and the Asian Condition*. London: Profile Books, 2020.

Horsman, Reginald. *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*. Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1981.

James-Chakraborty, Kathleen. *Architecture Since 1400*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Jameson, Fredric. »Future City.« *New Left Review*, 21, 2003, 65–79.

Ma, Ling. *Severance*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

Mingye, Li. »Evolution of Chines Ghost Cities: Opportunity for a Paradigm Shift? The Case of Changzhou.« *China Perspectives* (2017): 69-78.

Moreno, Gean. »Introduction.« In *In the Mind but Not From There: Real Abstraction and Contemporary Art*, ed. Gean Moreno. London: Verso, 2019, 1-15.

Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: NYU Press, 2018.

O'Neil, Cathy. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. New York: Broadway Books, 2016.

Perez, Caroline Criado. *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. New York, Random House, 2019.

Phillis, Jen Hedler. *Poems of the American Empire: The Lyric Form in the Long Twentieth Century*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019.

Richards, I.A. *Coleridge on Imagination*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.

Shaviro, Steven. »Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption.« *e-flux journal*, 46, 2018, http://worker01.e-Jflux.com/pdf/article_8869650.pdf.

Shepard, Wade. *Ghost Cities of China: The Story of Cities Without People in the World's Most Populated Country*. London: ZED Books, 2015.

Sohn-Rethel, Alfred. *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978.

Toer, Pramoedya Ananta. *This Earth of Mankind*. London: Penguin Books, 1996.

Wark, McKenzie. *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* New York: Verso, 2019.

Willems, Brian. »Automating Economic Revolution: Robert Heinlein's The Moon is a Harsh Mistress.« In *Economic Science Fictions*. Ed. Will Davies. London: Goldsmiths Press; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018, 73-92.

---. *Shooting the Moon*. Ropley, UK: Zero Books, 2015.

---. *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2019.

Brian Willems
University of Split
bwillems@ffst.hr

Konec ideologije: poezija Cathy Park Hong

Poezija v zbirki Cathy Park Hong *Empire Engine* (2012) je razdeljena v tri časovne okvire: obdobje ekspanzije proti zahodu v ZDA, sodobno zgodbo reproduciranja vizualnih umetnosti na Kitajskem in futuristično zgodbo zaposlenih na področju podatkovne obdelave v Kaliforniji. Članek raziskuje vlogo ideologije pri ustvarjanju ter vzdrževanju imperijev.

Ključne besede: Cathy Park Hong, ideologija, posebne ekonomske cone, ekspanzija na zahod, COVID-19