
更咸更濕
Too Salty
Too Wet

I cannot confirm or deny this as a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental, or a poor attempt at discretion. Initials have been changed.

Glossary: for readers from elsewhere, who don't deal very well with unknown words or who want to understand everything. But, perhaps, to establish for ourselves, ourselves as well, the long list of words within us whose sense escapes or, taking this farther, to fix the syntax of this language we are babbling. The readers of here are future.

Édouard Glissant*

Cross-cultural literacy needs to be taught, but it must also be actively taken up and learned. For how much this text bears in exposing ways, I claim the right to speak obtusely, to redact or to even bore. Do not look at this text to explain Hong Kong or these events to you completely. For readers outside of here, this text asks you to simply bear witness as best you can, as much as you can commit to the labor of learning a place from far away, without everything defined for you. Left mostly blank, the glossary is meant as a worksheet. Only two terms are defined:

* Glissant, Édouard. *Malemort*. Éditions du Seuil, 1975. 231.

Glossary

咸濕 (*ham sap*)

adj. Literally, salty wet. Perverse; perverted; obscene. Can also be written as 鹹濕.

更咸更濕 (*gang ham gang sap*)

adj. Literally, saltier and more wet. More perverse. Can also be written as 更鹹更濕.

更咸更濕

Salty Wet is an oral history of tears.

It is a name for the insurrectionary spirit
and its perspiration,

Of its vulgarity and its spectacle,

On the ineffability of living.

The following is a text as profane as
the times we inhabit.

This is not a love letter.

The following is a hellish scroll.

The dead have committed some portion of the evil of the night; sleep and love, the other. For what is not the sleeper responsible? What converse does he hold, and with whom? [...] Thousands unbidden come to his bed.

Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*[*]

History happened at night, and we watched.

* Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood*. Harcourt, 1936. 126.

The most significant events occured at night. I resented waking up only to discover events as yesterday's news. To be awake, as if standing watch, was to construct a collective conscience—Hong Kongers, together yet often in solitude, participated in an obsessive and incessant watching. To watch was to build a catalog of public memory. To look away was to give in to impunity, to relinquish the tacit social contract as witness and to allow forgetting. So who of the Hong Kong community, in and outside of here, could sleep anymore?

Crowded around a television store on a side street in Sham Shui Po one evening on one of my nights volunteering, I see a group of protestors pause, transfixed by large curved HD monitors broadcasting a live feed of police tear-gassing other protestors elsewhere on Nathan Road. As if suddenly stirring from a daze, one of the group urges the others to keep moving, "Change your clothes or change location. There's no point in lingering. You can watch the live-stream from home later."

While volunteering and standing alongside frontline protestors, I spent a lot of time waiting for the police to show up, or waiting for something to happen at a standoff. There would be long expanses of dead time. Anticipating the inevitable, I would flip through my phone, liking pictures of dogs on Instagram to calm myself down. These minutes were marked by an endless confluence of simultaneous boredom and terror. The rhythm of the crowd changed when something was about to happen, or when things suddenly escalated. It was as invisible and palpable as a sudden change in humidity, like smelling petrichor, the scent of rain on the earth—but on hot concrete. Sensing the shift in atmosphere, I would jam my gas mask and helmet on, which I'd wrap so tightly around my head that whenever I took it off, strands of hair came with it.

Events were dispersed and chaotic. They required you to watch from multiple angles to grasp their totalities. Even being out there, chasing after the frontlines was an incessant, exhausting asymptotic climb. Sometimes it was clear when you were at the front. There would be direct confrontations of protestors at predictable sites, like the clashes that started in front of Prince Edward police station, where people would lay flowers and burn rites for those who were rumored to have been killed by police inside the subway station. Events at this site always played out in a predictable arc: Protestors approaching the building, taunting with chants and songs. Warnings by the police over a microphone.* Teargas flags as warnings to disperse protestors to disperse. Then, protestors would move into formation with umbrellas. The frontlines would crouch on the ground, clustered at the front to meet the assault of projectiles and teargas cannisters, meanwhile others in the back move supplies, like umbrellas, helmets and water, forward. Then, dozens, if not hundreds, of rounds of teargas and assaults along Nathan Road followed, pushing the line back. With each new frontline re-drawn, the same arc of events would repeat.

Other times, it was hard to tell if you were at the front. A group of protestors waiting at the legislative council one weekday evening, poking holes in the water-filled barricades, waiting for the police to come out to confront them. But could you even call it "the front" if nothing happened and the police didn't respond? Where is the front of this story? We were always edging towards the front of history to make a statement about its truth.

I was constantly trailing the tail of the frontlines as they wove through Causeway Bay and Wan Chai and disappeared into side streets.

* Once I heard, "阿Sir, 你唱K呀?" one frontliner taunted. *Are you singing Karaoke for us?*

Frontlines would suddenly sprout behind me or in adjacent blocks. They were gone by the time I caught up. Fires blazed from barricades, and you could always count on dozens of journalists clamoring around them for a picture to tweet. As fast as these moments flashed up, they were also signs that you had lost the front, or were about to. Barricades were built and and burned as a distraction, to slow the police down or to spark a confrontation. Many journalists failed to resist the fires, and the temptation of these scenes for dramatic photos. Pictures of flaming barricades circulated widely, as evidence of rioters and destroyed property. These fires made for newsworthy pictures, but they also often meant that the frontlines had since moved elsewhere, or were about to.

Multiple frontline confrontations occurred simultaneously in one neighborhood, and sometimes they were scattered across the city. It was impossible to keep up. Living the relentless sequence of fractured events, the day would be stitched together into a clearer picture later, once a journalist had given a narrative angle to the timeline's arc. News bias aside, or not it was told with bias, the news defined how people gave language to these events, or would prepare themselves against disinformation: the headlines counted the amount of people at mass demonstrations, and contextualized each event into a broader narrative during a confusing time. The multiple channel live-stream acted as the closest thing to an unfiltered, omnipotent eye to events as they unfolded.

A cop pulled a pin and threw a teargas grenade underhanded into the crowd; it exploded with a loud bang three feet from my head. I saw its plume suspended in the air for just a moment from the corner of my eye, trailing like a small firework. People scattered in multiple directions. Our media culture, in movies and in the news and video games, inures us to the scene of an explosion, a loud bang, people running. Describing this to my American reader especially, I am queasy with the knowledge that this text thus far falls into genres of "conflict narratives," especially examples from the past century, written in English about conflicts in East Asia.* So while we gain intimacy with the frontiers of these conflicts through the filter of cultural otherness, it must be remembered that these conflict narratives were told about literal war, and of experiences from soldiers at the frontiers, fighting in the trenches, often in the wilderness. The actions in Hong Kong were carved into lunch hours, bank holidays and evenings after work, occupying urban terrain, and scrambling across streets, manicured parks and highway overpasses.

* For example, Tim O'Brien's *Things They Carried* or Michael Herr's *Dispatches.*

Public and shared Google Sheet of gear ranked by product and type for frontline protestors*

* [redacted], [redacted], 2020. [redacted].

Hong Kong's industries informed the folk infrastructures of resistance. A public Google Doc sheet listing various protection gear for the frontlines, including rankings and product features of gas masks and helmets, circulated widely. It was laid out in the logic of a product development chart with pictures alongside each item. Weekly direct action schedules cascaded anonymously via Airdrop on public transportation during commute hours. Actions were even called during lunch hours. Protest sing-alongs gathered at malls after school or work. Our daily lives transformed into the frontlines. One could even say it is telling that the most intense site of conflict in those months took place at the city's vocational institution, Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Hong Kong's main industries of import/export, logistics, sourcing and design offered a rehearsal for the organization of protests. There was always a pragmatic element that infused the egalitarian ethos of collective action, like transforming ubiquitous objects such as umbrellas and construction helmets into elements of resistance, or even the ease with which thousands of people would part the way to make room for an ambulance to pass or wheelchair users, the elderly, and children to walk first in larger demonstrations—so they could disperse earlier and avoid teargas, which typically came later in the day. These same arteries that opened up in mass demonstrations

carved out supply lines, pushing gear like umbrellas and water, or frontliners forward to the sites where police violence erupted. The frontliners, almost always young, were a buffer. They bought time and space for us all to disperse safely from the back. Organizing and adapting communication took different roles, and the frontlines were bonded by these folk and their everyday infrastructures, rehearsed by the city's industries and then activated into protests.

Hong Kong in those months defied the idea of conflict, while it solidified a new vernacular and practice. The protests were highly memeable. It was adapted as tactics in other places of protest, but for most from afar, the viewing of these images became part of a fact of visual consumption. Responding to someone's tweet describing the protestors' use of the very newsworthy anti-surveillance laser-pointers as "cyberpunk," William Gibson replied, "if it's not, what is?"

In the 1997 film *The Fifth Element*, the superhuman Lelu looks up and learns about "war" from a small computer tablet, watches as a barrage of images unfold in a montage conveying the concept of warfare. The scene ends climatically in a nuclear mushroom cloud. She cries. We now live in an age where Lelu's education is our daily experience. We do consume images of intense violence from far away with a Google search. Of this imagination, what ratio of these images are consumed by people vastly removed from these realities by geography, race, class, and all the other conditions that would create a gulf between those who live in precarity and those who find themselves with the privilege to choose empathy and forge it? The consumption of violence at the site of this empathy gulf is but a spectacle. For those who have endured prolonged action, these dimensions will seem familiar—often uncomfortably so. But what are the conditions that best generate a compassion that does not stall in fatigue and numbness for those who have not lived through such actions? When one can casually Google and consume violence through these means. That year the spectacle of violence, the notion of protests and the crystal form of collective anger became synonymous with Hong Kong. Hong Kong protests concretized a 21st century vision of what others from the outside understood as "unrest." But inside the spectacle, living it, was a time of never resting.

An eye lost to a projectile, a back incinerated by a teargas round, a collapsed lung punctured by a live round shot into a teenager's chest, entered our public consciousness that were felt beyond the victims themselves, who were often kept anonymous for their protection. These pictures of injuries sustained at the protests circulated online and became part of their visual lexicon. These incidents were incorporated into protest

chants and invoked into calls for justice. 還眼 (*wan ngan)* literally translates as "return the eye," it means "an eye for an eye." These injuries became symbols of collective pain and a call for justice. A collective body stitched a catalog of injury, a subversive body politic of grievances. Revenge is a major trope and driving force for most plots in Hong Kong cinema, and it is through cinema that Hong Kong exists in its most cohesive form.

Getting tear-gassed when it's hot, especially when you've been sweating and your pores are relaxed, is the most painful. It burns in the parts of your body where you've been sweating the most: the top of your head, the back of your neck, the inside of your elbow. Your natural reflex when choking is to try and catch your breath, but you are supposed to take short sips of air to resist pushing the teargas particles even deeper into your bronchioles. I wore a gas mask to prevent this from happening when I volunteered, although on one occasion, when I had had trouble strapping my gas mask on all day, teargas leaked in through a space by my chin. I stumbled my way into a church. The pastor was asking people to move upstairs, a strategy that seemed to guard against police coming inside. When I caught my breath and affixed my gas mask, I went back outside. A journalist stood next to me smoking a cigarette as the teargas dissipated. I waved the nose of my mask over the smoke but couldn't smell a thing. Coming home after long days of volunteering, I dumped my backpack, vest, and helmet at the door, stripped off my clothes, and walked to the shower. You must shower with cold water, not hot or warm, because you don't want to open up your pores to the tiny, invisible peppery particles that can imbed and inflame your skin. The proper way to deal with teargas is to quarantine your used items and wash them separately. I heard from one person that you had to wash your clothes up to five times to finally get teargas out. Do not wash pepper spray or teargas out with milk—only saline or copious amounts of water. There was a popular saying that you weren't a real Hong Konger if you hadn't eaten teargas. Many feared the entire city was covered in it. My friends who were parents feared taking their children to playgrounds for months lest they expose them to the invisible and pervasive residue. In those months, it was hard to ignore the acute eczema that seemed to afflict so many peoples' arms on my commute. It was everywhere.

There is, in fact, nothing at all exceptional about my experience on the frontlines. And there is a danger in centering myself in this first-person narrative. Some were in even more violent confrontations with police, beaten by batons or shot at with less lethal rounds or water cannon

(but the water cannon was often too slow to catch up with frontliners who dissipated like water). Or the worst and most unknown of these circumstances: to be disappeared and tortured at black sites. But writing against the long shadow of vague legal terror becomes an act of appearance, of exposure, of accountability—in the most urgent terms, writing in the first person provides scale. What is the shortest distance to communicate? What is the shortest distance to empathy? What is the shortest distance to solidarity?

Most white-collar workers in Hong Kong live in a different time zone. Those who do business here plan their days around time in New York, London or Tokyo. Outside of the US, where the rest of the world is practiced in bending around the gravitational pull of American time. During the protests we lived in a timezone of news cycles, and news consumption became a kind of mania. We waited for the East Coast to wake up and to see if we ended up on the front page of the New York Times, the "global paper of record." The New York Times provided the official language of how these events would be internationally understood, and they defined the mistakes we would be stuck trying to clarify. Journalists waited for editors to wake up and respond to pitches or edits. Hong Kong protestors waited for Washington to begin its day, for congress

Here's how NYC real estate could benefit from Hong Kong protests

2:10 PM ET Fri, 30 Aug 2019

Dolly Lenz, number one U.S. broker by dollar amount in sales, joins 'The Exchange' to discuss how New York real estate could benefit from the ongoing conflict in Hong Kong.

Screenshot from August 30th, 2019,* one day shy of the "8.31 incident"†

* "What the Hong Kong Protests Could Mean for NYC Real Estate." *CNBC*, CNBC, 2 Sept. 2019, www.cnbc.com/video/2019/08/30/heres-how-nyc-real-estate-could-benefit-from-hong-kong-protests.html

† I bestow it upon the reader to learn this event.

to convene to sign the bill, which some hoped would provide a solution. We woke up to receive this news as if it offered results. They occurred while we slept, if we even could.

Is this insurrection a sport? Sometimes, it's as if news outlets deployed sports writers to cover the Hong Kong protests: teargas badly lobbed back to riot police as if the protestors were in a game of hot-potato, tossing it back over the barriers; getting blamed for courting bad allies; foreign journalists critiquing what "won't work"; others weighing in on the righteousness of the movement, and a purity test on the movement's legitimacy. Conspiracy theories around CIA operatives murmured on Twitter from afar, but meanwhile, on the frontlines, the most potent rumors singled out undercover cops and provocateurs, called 鬼 (*gwai*), literally meaning "ghosts," which haunted the actions of the frontlines. The most urgent rhetorical debate was between tactics of civil disobedience versus the more confrontational tactics used by frontliners—refuting the term "riot," which was incorporated into protest chants like [redacted], [redacted]. But the nuance in the strategy of the frontlines become irrelevant, when the movement is ultimately trapped in a geopolitical board game and they are seen as a spectacle. Actions are going to be scored and written as if an insurrection is a spectator sport. It is simply

consumed the same way. A headline from The Sydney Morning Herald read: "A message to Hong Kong's protestors: there's only one way you can win."*

Eventually, it became ever harder for me to even look at the police, which was an impossible task when my very work was to [redacted] them. My volunteer work became even more challenging when I was forced to battle my nerves on the frontlines. Each of these violent moments—even watching them on the news—grafted fear into my impulses to flinch, to hesitate and to look away. I think there was a way in which I felt prepared because I had "seen it" so many times. Media culture has merely prepared us for what Evan Calder Williams, describes as the "hellish vagary of war."† What happens behind the screen in movies, first-person shooter games and news reportage is that the "explosion doesn't go anywhere. Nothing expands or [collapses]. The movement is circular."‡ Being teargassed multiple times, being in so many moments of ambush on the streets—even though I wasn't

* Hartcher, Peter. "A Message to Hong Kong's Protesters: There's Only One Way You Can Win." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, The Sydney Morning Herald, 2 Sept. 2019, www.smh.com.au/national/a-message-to-hong-kong-s-protesters-there-s-only-one-way-you-can-win-20190902-p52n3x.html.

† Williams, Evan Calder. *Shard Cinema* (Repeater Books, 2017), 117.

‡ Ibid.

beaten by police—in these moments you are aware of your own porosity, and in person these explosions penetrate the animal in your body. 震撼 (*zanham)* means to have an event leave a strong impression on you. It is to literally shake emotion, as if your insides possess seismic potential. This is how one's body experiences and remembers violence, or stores the memory of witnessing such violence towards another body nearby.

Between their legs and shields I caught a glimpse of a high-lumen flashlight reflecting the wet blood pouring down a young man's face from atop his head. The man stared blankly ahead and blinked as the blood dripped into his eyes. He was sitting on the ground, stunned. A few moments before, I watched a group of riot police tackle him. They stood surrounding him to prevent journalists and onlookers from documenting his arrest. It was unclear if it was an injury from a baton or if the police had smashed his skull into the pavement. The police had kettled a group of protestors in front of a church. They fired at least half a dozen rounds of teargas into a small area and tackled a few people to the ground. A young woman passed out face-down in the scramble, while several teargas canisters went off next to her head. Only after the gas cleared did she regain consciousness, open her eyes and lift her head. Her face was wet with tears. The cop who tackled her was still kneeling over her, and she woke up to his hand over her buttocks, held there the entire time she had been passed out on the ground.

You do not choose which of these events you remember the most. Your body picks for you. It chooses which events visit you in your dreams. Like a camera, our bodies also record history. They are somatic machines that bear witness to events and bind themselves in concurrent, entangled threads of psychic and physical pain. My body remembered these events for me. I conferred with these experiences later in my sleep.

Describing these scenes—the man bleeding from his head or the woman passed out face-down while a cop groped her in plain view of people filming—even writing about this, I fear only amplifies the ubiquity of violence that permeates our cultural imagination, that leads to the numb absorption of such scenes. If I were to show them through videos or pictures, they would perhaps only approximate the other violent scenes that their viewer has imagined or seen portrayed. They are already part of an image trail of violent scenes in wide circulation. How can I prevent the reader from automatically leaning into a numb

absorption? How can they defy the genre of the conflict narrative?

Political entropy had become a spectacle, abstracting from lived realities—their banality, their viscerality that defies the concise narrative. What was occurring in Hong Kong continued in its inscrutability despite hyper-documentation. As the months went on, people were still confused about what was happening here. Friends from New York congratulated me via text about the withdrawal of the extradition bill. This image trail gets no closer to telling the events themselves. When the sight of killing or violence fails to radicalize someone—but instead brings compassion fatigue—what does "concerned photography" accomplish? Failing to redeem its subjects, the ubiquitous images of violence instead numbs us. Killing is one act, but creating the permission and toppling public resistance to killing is part of a broader weapon. Occupation stages a political theater of terror, and that these scenes merely become a distant, consumable fact for those who do not live is part of its design.

Protest tourism animated the most perverse performance of spectatorship. Along a corridor adjacent to Tamar Park, near the public restrooms, police kettled approximately fifty people. They were forced to sit or kneel on the ground. This corridor kept the arrests from being documented until the police marched them out by gender onto separate buses as they detained them. I stood next to someone who approached a journalist in a yellow vest, saying that his friend in there had taken a picture. He tried to airdrop the images to her, as she frantically tried to turn on Bluetooth on her phone. Dozens of people, many journalists and volunteers, stood around trying to get a sense of what was going on inside.

As we were all waiting to see what would happen, two white tourists trotted to the front of the scene, one of them extended their arm high above their heads with his phone in his hand facing them both. As they leaned into the frame of the picture, he rotated his phone lengthwise and they smiled. They began speaking into the video. "We're in Hong Kong right now!" And then they smiled silently again and took another picture. Another time I was volunteering and on an overpass observing one of the most violent mass assaults with water cannons, projectiles and teargas below. Wearing a gas mask, I looked to my right and saw white French teenagers idly watching and smoking cigarettes. Many people went up to them to tell them it wasn't safe here, but they stayed and watched. It was not uncommon to see expats or tourists watching protests while casually drinking beers from the sidelines, and they acted as if they were literally impervious to the assaults and teargas occurring around them. In some ways, they were.

Near Harcourt, I saw a big, burly white American man, bellowing his support at the protestors as he followed alongside them, en route from Admiralty to Harcourt. "The whole world is watching. We support you! Americans support Hong Kong protestors!" The protestors cheered. He went on, "You're the real communists. China's not communists, they're capitalists. You're the real communists!" Frontliners looked at each other for a moment but kept walking to Harcourt. Later, I found a picture on my Twitter timeline of the same man slumped on the floor. He had been arrested later that day. For some, it seemed like they needed to travel to the other side of the world in search of some idea of Revolution as experience, or to see to judge for themselves if it even was.

I wondered about the potentials of what being a witness could bring. At best, even protest tourists could testify in court or contribute to future independent inquiries on conduct, and at the very least, what stories they could tell when they returned from their sojourn in Hong Kong, or what debates they would have in their expat enclaves about what they could have seen. These protest tourists fluctuated in numbers as the weeks went on, slumping as arbitrarily as Hong Kong was present in international coverage. At worst, laughably, they were a postmodern version of *Heart of Darkness*, but would fail to be more iconic or poetic than the original. Instead, history's own mimetic image of a cross-cultural tradition often projected itself before me on the frontlines, only more boring. Corny rather: "The horror, the horror," in an Instagram caption. What apocalypse narratives miss is that the end-world is as much an event, as for some, as it is a consumable, adrenaline-high spectacle.

A common epithet in Hong Kong protests says: "Do not become numb 唔好麻木, do not get used to this, 唔好習慣, do not accept defeat 唔好放棄." Channeling Bruce Lee's aphorism "be like water," resistance is a total embodied system, corporeal and mental. To engage, to faithfully watch the times we lived, we collectively tried to heighten conscience arousal—and to maintain it. I tried actively to be present for these violent images. If meditation and body-mapping could be inverted into a mindfulness focused on negative, ugly feelings, I employed these means to be more familiar with the prolonged experience of dread and fear. I sat through scrolling my timeline of news, often pushing past what I could bear, but it was out of duty that I was a masochist to watch. Rest felt like embracing the impotence of sorrow and defeat, and pleasure, grotesque. I think often about the limits of empathy. Sontag's focus in *Regarding The Pain of Others* is premised primarily on the distance of being witness to images—two-dimensional, abstracted, reproduced and dispersed image-trails of conflict, and assumes a distance of the viewer from their physical events.

Sontag challenged that "'concerned' photography had done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it."* To fight becoming desensitized, I attempted to stretch my mental capacities ever further.

Crying felt useless. For those who were addicted to maintaining a fidelity to these events, a feeling of fraudulence accompanied sorrow. I often felt, who was *I* to deserve to cry? To feel release, or to rest? Likening it to survivor's guilt, my friend K[redacted], pointed out that if you weren't beaten or arrested, you always felt like you weren't at the *front*. Pity didn't change the material conditions of those who were jailed or beaten, those who had disappeared, and crying about political events is one that carries with it an inherent danger, verging on narcissism, to see only the functional expression of these events as a personal experience of sorrow. For me, who simply bears witness to these events, or feel great compassion for the ones who are at the front, sympathy itself, alone in its impotence, lacked agency, lacked a pointed rage translated into action. Sorrow without action, for the idle observer, makes only a performance of passion.

* Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Penguin, 2019. 21.

In Dante's *Inferno*, the gates of Hell contain the following inscription:

Through me the way into the suffering city,

Through me the way to the eternal pain,

Through me the way that runs among the lost.†

The shortest distance to the front was often the live-stream. 直播 (*tsik bo*) means live-stream, or live broadcast, literally translating as straight, or linear, broadcast. Events arrived before us through these streams without editorialization. Unless the entire scene is staged, live-streams cannot (yet) be faked. A live-stream moves with a body: the feed shakes synchronically to each step, recording at times the breathlessness of the person holding the device as they run to capture the critical moment. We watched them while eating dinner. I often observed people viewing live-streams even while being adjacent to the frontlines. Hong Kongers were glued for months on end to live-streams, even the English word itself adapted into conversations in Cantonese. As though viewed through an RPG (role-playing game), we watched these live-streamers get pepper-sprayed, beaten, chased, kettled and tear-gassed. When we watched these streams,

† Alighieri, Dante. *La Divina Commedia*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum, Bantam Books, 1982. Canto I-iii.

we heard their voices narrating the events before us. Violent clashes each week told a chronological narrative, and each event pushed the threshold for violence. The summer started with teargas, and as the violence escalated during those weeks, I wondered if I was going to watch someone die on the timeline.

Infinite scrolling

不停碌機

It felt as if the urgency of this historical moment would be abated by instantaneous news and information. And its call was louder than that of my own routines, my job and sometimes my personal relationships. In her book *Cruel Optimism,* Lauren Berlant warns, "What hits a person encountering the dissemination of news about power has nothing to do with how thorough or cultivated their knowledge is or how they integrate the impact into living."*

Hong Kong people, in and outside of the city, lived in this atmosphere of violence, and although we experienced it collectively, we often did so in solitude, each on our respective screens and

* Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2012. 227.

beds. The illusion of authenticity, proximity to events, the climb towards "being political," at the front, poses the falsehood that to pay attention at such a manic pace could prove redemptive. Knowing these events does not tell you how to live or endure. Even if our collective memories were no match to systemic impunity in our lifetimes, news addiction crossed the threshold into making us victims of terror, and none the wiser. Even seeing this sadness as a collective process doesn't shatter the inherent loneliness of the experience; the intensity of the pain, fear, and sorrow resides in the grip of solitude. Our attachment to mediated violence merely became complicit to a whole system of fear politics. Our phones fed a continuous and daily experience of trauma and incessant fear. And I, like many, failed to resist its spectacle.

Becoming entangled with this timeline was to inhabit its inner spirit and breath. To truly know the weight of the times was to take hold of this heavy, ungraspable quality, as invisible as humidity, but to feel the weight materialize as rage, anger or fear. The breath rules the invisible. 氣 (*hei)* is a multivalent word meaning gas or air, but also translates as breath. The character makes its cameo in terms that describe these phenomena and systems: 天氣 (*teen hei:* weather), 空氣 (*hong hei*: air, atmosphere), 氣功 (*hei gong*: the ancient practice of breath-work as it relates to health, spirituality and martial-arts). These multiple threads of meaning weave 氣 into

the vital force of life. Expanding and squeezing your diaphragm in indignant rhythm, the breath propels the expression of every chant you're part of. The breath connected us in spirit, and it will carry forth our oral history. To look away risked detachment from the breath's many threads in these times.

After long days volunteering, of being out for nearly 10 consecutive hours, I would lay on my couch or bed, having showered the teargas off of me, still wrapped in a towel, still glued to the live-stream. I refreshed my Twitter feed every two minutes. On some days, I felt a nerve stiffen from my thumb to my neck like a twisted wire, as if my body had started to bend itself around its parasite. I wondered how far we were from inventing a gag phone charger that could power a device from the heat of a belly-button like an umbilical cord. Even after I put my phone down, turned the lights off to go to sleep and closed my eyes, and I could see riot police. Lying in the dark, they played like an autofeed of vague shapes, moving like ants in some orchestrated chaos. I had watched them for so long while volunteering that their shape continued to move in pattern when I closed my eyes. I couldn't sleep anymore.

I told [redacted] about how addicted I had become to the news. A [redacted], whom I work with at the [redacted]. Realizing a few of us at the [redacted] shared similar political views, we held meetings as a small group every few weeks. These meetings would sometimes go on for several hours. We'd share stories, exchange information and pick over conspiracy theories. [redacted] and [redacted] would talk about their kids and the uncertainty of the future. "Eventually, I'll have to find a way out for my daughter. Find a way for her to go to high school abroad." He paused. "Hong Kong doesn't have any hope." One day, [redacted] looked at me, noticing how drained I was. "You need a break. I was there where you are now a few weeks ago. You really just need to get away from Hong Kong for even a day or two." To look away for a few days, even for a much-needed vacation or trip out of Hong Kong, posed the potential trap of rendering these events incoherent. Understanding of this moment relied upon an intimacy with its events.

Surrendering to live-streams is also an act of relenting to trauma. These streams open one totally to experiences of disturbing images anytime, anywhere. Videos have the power to implicate the beholder in the consumption of violence, especially when that goal is to turn one a spectator in a theater of state-run terror. The existence of videos have no power

to render justice in systems that function in impunity. I knew that, as the police increasingly disregarded the cameras' presence, they willingly constructed a theater of terror that played out weekly to discourage people from protesting. It also seemed no coincidence that rumors—such as Photoshopped pictures of military encampments along the harborfront or high-production videos of PLA drills—were typically distributed later in the weekdays leading up to the weekend of protests. They planted seeds at opportune moments to sow fear. Instead, these scenes and videos have served, as Evan Calder Williams has described, as "their explicit display, as spectacles of trauma designed to shame the dead, warn the living to stay in line, and entertain those who gained from the enterprise."* Williams describes this as part of the system of racial capitalism, and this spectacle broadly also goes by another name: The political theater of terror, and it is the texture of the police state. Acts of torture perform pain as a theater for its prisoner. As Elaine Scarry states, "It is not accidental that in the torturers' idiom the room in which the brutality occurs was called 'the production room' in the Philippines,' the 'cinema room' in South Vietnam, and the 'blue lit stage,' in Chile."† Scarry goes on, "But whatever the regime's primary weapon, it is only one of many weapons and its display is only one of many endlessly multiplied acts of display: torture is a process."‡ And yet, these acts are largely invisible to the public. On live-streams, these beatings of civilians are bold and overt. You are the audience for whom the violence is performed.

I lived my fears in my dreams. Sometimes traumatic experiences came back in literal ways, scenes re-lived precisely during sleep. Or sometimes, in suspended consciousness, I dreamt colors or vague shapes that took no narrative form. I would wake up, kicking off sheets wet from sweating through the night. It made me dread sleep, because fear was most visceral and total in my sleep. Once, I dreamt I was with some young female protestors, untangling a black elastic band from a girl's long black ponytail, when suddenly the cops started chasing us in full riot gear, opaque and reflective mylar covering their visors. I felt a sharp jab in the center of my back, and I woke up surprised to find myself clawing to the other side of the bed. I could still feel the dream's lingering impression in the center of my spine, and when I realized it was a dream, I became convinced that I hadn't just imagined the physical sensation. Maybe it was real. I thought perhaps I was being visited by a spirit. Barely awake, I made peace with the

* Williams, *Shard Cinema*. 81.

† Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1987. 28.

‡ Scarry. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. 27.

Outside Prince Edward Police Station

knowledge of its presence before falling asleep again. So many nights unfolded in a mixture of terror and insomnia, and sometimes a bad night's sleep, waking up to the familiarity of a pale blue early morning light—even sometimes seeing the morning in a hypnagogic state, that sticky place where consciousness is half suspended from sleep—comforted me with the morning to come, that the night has finally ended. And I could stop watching.

In September, Veby Mega Indah, a 39-year-old Indonesian journalist, was shot by the police in the eye with a projectile and blinded. "This is crazy," she exclaimed in an interview, "we are not in a war zone."* The line echoes in my mind often. It felt rare to hear a journalist respond so bluntly to events on the record. Even in personal conversations, I often felt frustrated with some journalists who couldn't relent their professional neutrality to offer what I felt were more natural human responses. 講人話啦! (*gaung yan wah la*) is a plea in Cantonese to speak literally in a human language. It is the language of the gut. Permanently blinded by the projectile and suffering from the trauma and injustice of that event, Indah's reaction exposed a very visceral insight about the changes rapidly occurring in

* "Video shows journalist injured as Hong Kong police fire on protesters," CNN, November 5, 2019. YouTube video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZBU9WC50oU&feature=youtu.be.

Hong Kong. What happened to her occurred out of proportion with the level of violence expected in a place like Hong Kong: a city that lauded itself as a so-called "global city."

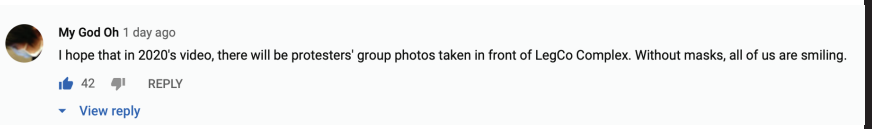
Seven months into protests, researchers from the University of Hong Kong found that nearly one in three adults demonstrated symptoms of post-traumatic disorder.* This only confirmed what many of us knew as self-evident. My therapist asked me how I felt when I learned about the endemic PTSD, and suggested another diagnosis—perhaps more accurate—called C-PTSD. While PTSD describes the processing of past trauma, C-PTSD engages ongoing, prolonged and/ or repeated trauma. The "C" stands for "complex." My therapist ran through a long list of symptoms and effects.

Through these months, colleagues broke out in hives. My friend's knee tore. A few friends' eczema became acute. A[redacted]'s herniated disc inflamed. Intense insomnia and bodily depression overcame me. I had constant stomach pains. I was often nauseous. I developed

* Ting, Victor. "Hong Kong Protests: Mental Health Issues Rise Drastically with More than 2 Million Adults Showing Signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Study Finds." *South China Morning Post*, 10 Jan. 2020.

a sensitivity to certain foods I hadn't before and had a hairline trigger for an upset stomach. Mysterious rashes. A patch of flaky, dry skin on my chin persisted for weeks after teargas snuck into my gas mask in that same spot, inflamed by my constant picking. Insomnia, anxiety and depression seemed endemic. It was hard to not extrapolate meaning from these signals. "Trauma," my therapist explained, "fractures cohesive thought."

I lost my appetite in those months. The pit of dread, a hard knot in my stomach, made it hard to finish meals. I couldn't tell if I was hungry or anxious, and felt a sense of constant dis-ease in my core. While volunteering in August, I was running between ten and fifteen miles each day with a nine-pound tripod, fully strapped with gear including a helmet and gas mask, and a full backpack of supplies. By the end of the year, my pants were so loose I could fit both of my forearms into them. Already slim to begin with, I had lost so much muscle mass that I couldn't run wearing the same weight without aggravating an injury in my back. My endurance wore down. When I saw my friends in New York for the first time in only a few months, they all asked if I was OK; it was only upon seeing me then that they really understood the intensity of the events here. I was aware, of course, of how much weight I was losing. While I was in some ways relieved



Salty Salting the earth and destroying cities.	Wet Sometimes doesn't it feel like you could inhale sadness, like how impossible it seems that air could hold so much wetness, like it does in Hong Kong? The air is so damp here, I feel like I am inhaling sadness in the summer months. I walk slower, because it tires me to walk any faster than a stroll against air that seems to bend itself to hold so much moisture that it is palpable internally. In Chinese medicine terms, it is "wet." Your body if yin is "wet."

that I hadn't developed any compulsive eating behavior, to see myself hemorrhage weight, awfully, sorrowfully manifested how I felt inside. I was angry at how literal my sorrow was.

"[The] camera has provided me with multiple shields from the painful memory of war, while allowing me to come as close as possible to try to understand it."

An-My Lê*

* Masters, HG. "Theater of Observation." *ArtAsiaPacific*, 2008, artasiapacific.com/Magazine/60/TheaterOfObservationAnMyLe.

Taken from Nathan Road in Kowloon, Hong Kong on October 20, 2019

Each demonstration, even before this summer, took a tone of intense foreboding, a sense that we were exercising ephemeral rights. Marches often held the peculiar solemnity of bereavement. It was as though annual political rituals, like the rallies on June 4th and the marches on July 1st, could summon a different future by animating the numerological power of historical dates. Walter Benjamin's Angel of History begs us to ask whether people have the power to summon the agent of historical change.* Marches or rallies were called on symbolic dates, such as observing historic dates like June 4th and July 1st, or turning-points in the protests, like July 21st and August 31st. It was as if the winds of history could propel us forward. Vigils on June 4th were collective actions in solidarity and dialoguing with the dead, of summoning the ghosts of dead dissidents, and even all those who died in Tiananmen. A protest held in the New Territories in Sha Tin, changed the scenery of the protests, invoking the notion of 有山有水 (*yau san yau sui*), a feng shui belief that landscapes holding both mountains and bodies of water reap auspicious energy.† By invoking the power of numerological superstition and the occult power of geography, *maybe we could invert its outcome this time.* Hong Kongers pondered if we could thwart this relentless timeline.

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* Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations.* Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1968. 12-13.

† @antd, Twitter post, July 14 2019, 5:07 p.m., https://twitter.com/antd/status/1150330939798511616.

In Hong Kong, expiration dates parody historical milestones. We are predestined by a colonial contract of unprecedented, nebulous terms. Like 1997, 2047 portends a yet-unknowable sequence of events leading up to a finale, and we will outlive the original architects of the colonial contract. Historical time is typically understood as chronological, as events that precipitate. But here we live in upside-down time. We know not what happens *now* or *in-between* 2047, but we know what happens in the end. Time expires like a burning fuse. Resistance itself becomes a metaphysical feat: *how must we kill time?*

Mourning cities has existed throughout history, and observing loss and the irrevocable change in Hong Kong reckoned essentially with an abstraction. What does it really mean for a city to die? Mourning a person has comparisons. Grieving the death of his mother, Barthes understood the meaning of mourning to exist both in and outside of time. "There is a time when death is an *event*...and then one day it is no longer an event, it is another *duration*, compressed, insignificant...true mourning [is] not susceptible to any narrative dialectic."* Mourning takes an obtuse path when the moment of death is uncertain. Did the death of Hong Kong arrive via a flurry of tweets by journalists from a press conference on May 21st? And then again, officially, at 11pm on the evening of June 30th, 2020, as though certified by a death certificate published in the form of a PDF?†

When Barthes asked, "who will write the history of tears? In which societies, in which periods, have we wept?," I wondered to what extent he was mocking.‡ History unfurls as a series of receipts that show an assemblage of primary and secondary accounts. In a story that focused so much on macro-transactions—geopolitical lobbying, blockbuster IPO's that moved capital from one stock exchange to another, luxury real estate speculation in overdrive, and the dizzying lawfare—what are the artifacts in this event for the history of tears? In the digital age, what will primary sources resemble? Will bibliographers be sorting through DM's, WhatsApp and Telegram messages, Twitter accounts, e-mails, et cetera? What will the rooms of all this data they have on us amount to when we are dead? For Walter Benjamin, "Death is the sanction of everything the story-teller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death."§ Historians teach us how to know events after they are finished. It is exactly

* Barthes, Roland. *Mourning Diary*. Hill and Wang, 2012.

† I bestow it upon the reader to learn this event. Refer to the glossary.

‡ Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Hill and Wang, 2010.

§ Benjamin. *Illuminations*. 94.

with the authority of the future, the authority of the victor to decide how school textbooks will enumerate these events, and yet still, how does one write about the process of living through a metastasizing present, a becoming of history that is yet unfinished? What will disappear from the written record? What stories did not even make the news?

The dominant written records of these times were delivered by journalists. They took on the undeniably essential task of telling these events day after day, and provided visibility in increasingly opaque times, when survival demanded news literacy. However, blatantly false descriptions, such as "island city," somehow propagated in these months by foreign news outlets, should not enter any historical record. Accounts of protestors dispersing should include a note that some journalists outed their locations in real-time on Twitter. Myriad mistakes, both factual and ethical, occured in those months. These examples do not repudiate the essential role of journalism in these times—but they also demand that we see those stories at the margins of living the spectacle itself. They illustrate the friction and mistrust between frontliners and some foreign correspondents. They also bear the queasiness of living inside something that you inherently know relies on precarious international attention, risking misinterpretation, mishandling and mistranslation from those who report it, especially from the outside. What does it mean to be living in an event that there is a global news appetite for, when people would risk your safety to tell your story? Living inside—often alongside—the news spectacle makes known the transactional nature of this exchange between those in the center of events and those who report on it from the outside, whose missives make up these receipts of our times.

To be sure, the exchange goes both ways: for a movement that was leaderless, the aim to constantly innovate protest tactics was a plea not only for building collectivity, but also for using direct action to enter, interrupt and shape the news cycle. The media was a tool. This ethos drove the strategy of actions, as protestors appealed to journalists and the photojournalistic gaze for an international audience: including ongoing rallies such as 燭光晚會 (*chuk gwong man wui*), waving iPhone flashlights in place of candles for photogenic moments; the commitment to shouting protest slogans in both Cantonese and English; and the emulation of The Baltic Way protests staged across the city and also on Lion's Rock, invoked an international, trans-historical resonance. Still, these consciously spectacular moments rest alongside other narratives, relegated—sometimes out of protection, at times even out of shame—to the private. These newsworthy actions present only a partial picture: only what is most materially visible or legible. Journalists

filed their stories sitting on the pavement with their helmets and hi-vis vests on. Many I knew dropped everything in their lives during those moments to be there relentlessly day after day. I saw them get shot at with projectiles. They pulled countless all-nighters. I was ever grateful and in awe of their commitment to weaving these confusing events into digestible words as fast as they did, especially local journalists. But still—many essential accounts eluded them. "You hear a lot of insane stories that went untold," one journalist told me. Countless stories went untold by journalists to protect individuals, or some disappeared in failed pitches to their editors from afar.

Crying or sorrow alone is not newsworthy—so Barthes' words called out to me like a dare. Historical transition reconfigured us upon these individual, private sites of feelings: grief, anger and even denial. To write the history of tears is to document an oral history of sorrow, and these times breathed a spirit with its own momentum in each of us. This spirit ruptured how we experienced the day to day. It ripped apart relations and built new ones. It questioned and reconstructed notions of normalcy. Marcuse writes that in protesting, "the intellectual refusal may find support in another catalyst…it is their lives which are at stake, and if not their lives, their mental health and their capacity to function as un-mutilated humans. Their protest will continue because it is a biological necessity."* Sorrow fueled the very fire that galvanized us, burning somatic inscriptions of pain and illness. I cried often in those months, holding my phone in my hands at night. We all cried, and it was as if during these months each person observed grief take over our body as hosts. To document sorrow was to make trauma visible and to illuminate the somatic narrative that wove through and connected us. It was to tell the gulf between the spectacle and our experience as lived.

To write an oral history is also to capture events and phenomena in the act of evaporating. In these times certain actions depend on less visible and public expressions. They are even threatened into absence, forced into the disappeared, written as the redacted and deleted. They are Telegram channels and forums rendered blank. Many of these stories will perhaps disappear from view forever. The graffiti that lay in public view all over the city was an authorless record of anger and frustration. Their imprints throughout the city flashed up and then disappeared under the municipal authorities' sisyphean daily efforts to paint over, smear with solvents and tear off. You simply cannot document them at the speed that they are being written. How do we bear witness to the invisible?

* Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilisation*. Beacon Press, 1955. xxv.

As for the disappeared, we don't know the extent of their realities. Some accounts emerge as leaks, like rumors or testimonials of exiles who suddenly emerge, but these, we must remember, are partial glimpses. They have no ability to tell us their total experiences, which remain largely occluded from public view. There is a silent void.

My phone wove an incongruous timeline: Alongside violent images from Hong Kong on my feeds came blithe personal content from the US. During the peak of the protests, the alternate reality of my friends back in New York transmitted between these apps. Images of July 4th American flag cakes on Instagram stories, tweets about "hot girl summer" and Labor Day vacations. The New York Times published an article on swimming holes in Berlin adjacent to a news story about escalating police violence in Hong Kong. Alongside these glimpses of life from far away, and my other home in New York, came countless videos and pictures unfurling in Hong Kong: A teenager with his front teeth knocked out, a knee in his back, nearly chewing the gravel with snot and blood dripping from his nose as he wept underneath a cop's body weight. A group of people being thwacked like cattle with long poles by triads as commuters left a subway station after a day of protest. Endless teargas. The contrast between the two colliding timelines felt mocking and cruel. I couldn't help but harbor a sense of

A panel from *Hell Scroll*, Artist Unknown*

* Unknown. *Hell Scroll* (地獄草紙). 12th century, Nara National Museum, Nara, Nara Prefecture, Japan.

rage, even at myself, for resenting these images of calm or joy from afar. This compression of timelines was so unbearable.

A smartphone, tablet, or computer screen is itself a kind of scroll. Its very interface design animates form into an action. Information unfurls relentlessly under your finger. Ancient hand scrolls contain multiple illustrated scenes of a singular moment in time, or a consecutive narrative along a linear trajectory. One unfurls the scroll, panel by panel, at shoulder width. Viewing is an intimate act. Panel by panel, an apocalypse is a revelation: Our daily feed shows us these times in bare terms. Hell is not a place. Hell is a timeline.

In the timeline we live in, it is impossible to uncouple one narrative from another. Being attached to two places meant cataclysmic events increasingly occurred simultaneously. They were compounded, tangled and fused. I thought often about the refrain in "The Hell Scroll," a Japanese work from the twelfth century depicting seven out of sixteen lesser hells. The seven hells are the Hell of Excrement, Hell of Measures, Hell of the Iron Mortar, Hell of the Flaming Rooster, Hell of the Black Sand Cloud, Hell of Pus and Blood and Hell of Foxes and Wolves. Each panel

A panel from *Hell Scroll*, Artist Unknown*

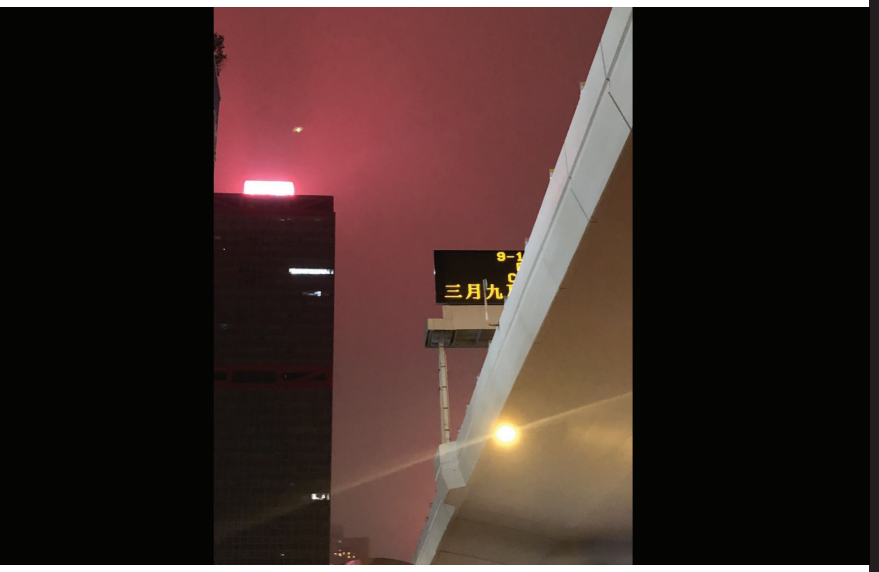
* Unknown. *Hell Scroll* (地獄草紙). 12th century, Nara National Museum, Nara, Nara Prefecture, Japan.

that accompanies the text, all beginning with the phrase, "There is yet another hell." When I moved back to Hong Kong I wondered about what it would feel like inversely to be untethered to the news in the US.

The videos circulating on my Twitter feed re-triggered my symptoms, as Black Lives Matter kicked off again in the US in 2020. After a week of texting with friends over Signal who had been beat up by cops or arrested, I was back to sleeping four hours per night. When morning came for New York, I rushed through my feed to catch up on the news, my body stiffening with the same nerves I had experienced last year. That same feeling of the stiffened wire in my neck between my thumb and my head. One night, after a particularly violent day, I couldn't sleep. There was a silent lightning storm. Half asleep, the flashing lights outside my window entered my dreams: I dreamt I was being chased by cops. I woke up convinced someone was going to bust through the bedroom door. I tapped A[redacted], "I'm having nightmares. Can we switch sides?" I fell back asleep again and it hadn't been an hour when I turned over to see him sitting up and staring at his pillow. "What's going on? Should I turn the light on?" As I reached for the light, he yelled and stumbled backwards out of bed. I split my knee open against the bed as I tried to get out, and I looked over at his pillow. My glasses, still on the bedside. I made out the silhouette of a nearly foot-long centipede scuttling into the space between the mattress and the headboard. It was hard not to see it as an omen.

We live in the antipodes of hell.

When I wrote "Hong Kong is the first postmodern city to die," it was March 2019, three months before the protests began. It was a tweet. When it appeared in *Salty Wet*, some saw it as a prescient vision, while others reacted with incredulity (*Do you really think so?*), defensiveness (*Hong Kong is not dead, we will still live here*) and defiance (*Hong Kong will fight on*). In the tradition of writing poems while gazing at the moon, intoxicated, I was with J[redacted] and A[redacted] at the time, walking to make the ferry before the sunset, and tipsy. It was especially smoggy that day and the light diffused against the wet pollutant particles and cast burning colors reflected against slick buildings sprayed by the mist of light rain. Meant as a provocation, when the line came to me and I tweeted it out, it merged three thoughts at the time. I will tell them here in three sections. I also took this picture:



Hong Kong peaked during the height of the postmodern era in the 1980s and 1990s. As the harbor city at the center of global trade, it was the busiest container port in the world between the years of 1987 to 1989 and from 1992 to 1997 (and also between 1999 to 2004).* During those years, the Pearl River Delta was the channel through which the most material goods in the world passed. Hong Kong lay the cusp of the world's supply chain during the ramp up of globalization. While Hong Kong cultural theorist Ackbar Abbas has described the city's culture as an "elusive subject" in perpetual disappearance,† its material culture expresses its irrefutable imprint on the industrialized world. To tell Hong Kong through the lens of design and material history is to tell the city, and the Pearl River Delta, on its own material terms.

Central design offices may have been in metropoles like London, Paris or New York in the 1980s and 1990s, Hong Kong served as a site of liaison, where sketches and ideas were adapted into serial production and material form. Placing Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta in history as the nexus of global industrialization

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* "Vessel Arrivals by Ocean/River and Cargo/Passenger Vessels," Hong Kong Marine Department, 2020. https://www.mardep.gov.hk/en/publication/pdf/portstat_1_m_a1.pdf.

† Abbas, M. A. *Hong Kong Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 25.

also reimagines design as a geographically dispersed and global process. In his essay "Early Modern Design in Hong Kong," Matthew Turner writes, "The economic strategy of this region was characterized by first, a labor-intensive system of serial or mass production; second, a strong export orientation; and third, a process of adaptive design."* The Pearl River Delta, Turner continues, was "the crucible for export designs that adapted the world's goods to Chinese materials and manufacture" in the nineteenth century in the colonial era, but this process can date as far back as the tenth century.†

Hong Kong's status as a global nexus also bears a history of violent exchange. The special territory was established as a new crown colony as a result of the Opium Wars between Britain and China; as historian Lisa Lowe describes, the territory satisfied the colonial mercantile strategy of "the expansion of British imperial sovereignty in Asia," which was based on "liberal ideas of 'free trade' and 'government.'"‡ The Pearl River Delta was also a site for trafficking drugs and coolies. As Hong Kong historian Christopher Munn states, "two great trades sustained Hong Kong's early economy: the import of opium into China, and the export of labor out of China."§ Coolies were captured and sent to the Americas as unfree Chinese labor, "shipped on vessels much like those that had brought the slaves they were designed to replace."¶ As an export hub, Hong Kong began as a site that ushered the dark trade of opium and human tracking of the coolie trade during the colonial era. Established by liberal free-trade principles as a special territory, this legacy haunts the port city and its current flows of objects and textiles through these same territorial waters.

The Pearl River Delta is the material birthplace of globalism, and on a map, it even looks like a cunt. A dirty joke lies in this map: look at it one way and you see the Pearl River Delta, look at it another way and you see a cunt. Look at it another way and you see the Greater Bay Area. Hong Kong was always built for extraction.

2 Salt to Taste

Crisis news is a genre film. As Hong Kong's rule of law unraveled rapidly throughout these past months, the events here have become a spectacle that captured the front pages of newspapers around the world. Flaming barricades, umbrellas

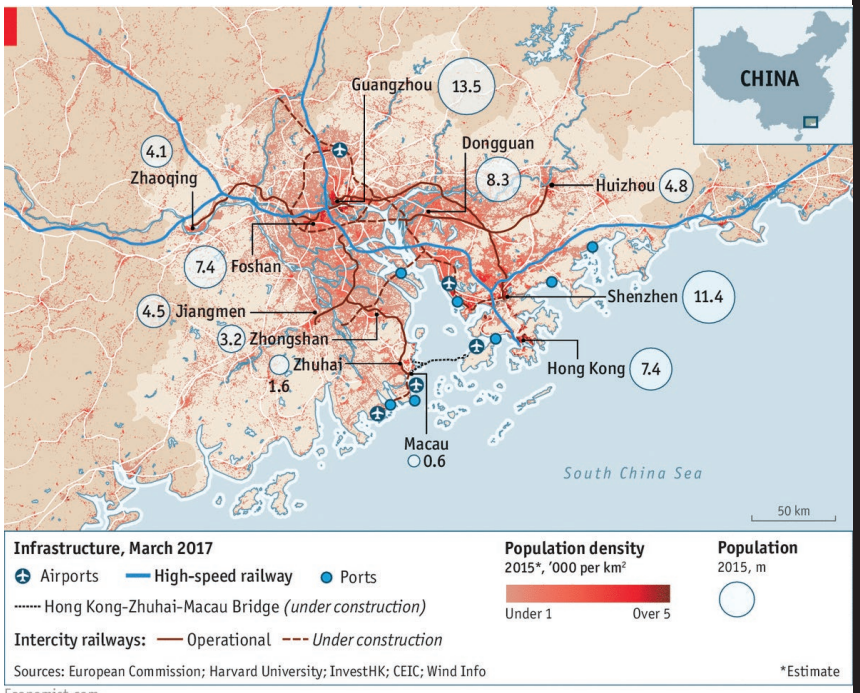
* Clark, Hazel, et al. "Early Modern Design in Hong Kong." *Design Studies: A Reader*, Bloomsbury, 2013. 22.

† Ibid.

‡ Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke University Press, 2015. 99.

§ Christopher Munn, "The Hong Kong Opium Revenue, 1845–1885," *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839–1952*, ed. Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. 105–126.

¶ Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. 24.



Map of the Pearl River Delta*

* "What China can learn from the Pearl river delta," The Economist, April 6, 2017. https://www.economist.com/special-report/2017/04/06/what-china-can-learn-from-the-pearl-river-delta.

open against teargas, the stream of blue from a water cannon against small cowering bodies, and green lasers shooting across the foreground of the Hong Kong skyline made for sensational pictures. News-making took on cinematic proportion. Compelling images of political crisis had in them the power to hold attention from observers of faraway, and Hong Kong, in the scale of international media, eclipsed news in other places such as Xinjiang, Haiti, Chile, Iran and Puerto Rico, which were concurrent to the Hong Kong protest timeline. What was exceptional about Hong Kong taking over international news in the latter half of 2019 and beyond is that it drew headlines not because it exceeded the level of violence in other places—it did not—but because it featured a central position in geopolitical arcs, such as the trade war. Perhaps that is what remains so enduring about the fall of Rome in the historical imagination: it is indeed a rare moment in history that we get to watch a city of this scale—of such cultural hold in the global imagination and of great financial capital—die.

Cities have died throughout history. Or, conversely, empires have killed them. "Salting the earth" is the idiom for desecrating a conquered city and rendering its land arid and uninhabitable. It is said that the Romans killed Carthage this way, but this is untrue. As Ronald T. Ridley describes, "salting the earth" is a mere "contamination" from the history of other places, lesser known in our contemporary

imagination, of ancient cities of the "near East" like Hatussa, Arinna and Hunusa that were killed in ritualistic fashion.* When captured and destroyed, these places were sown with minerals and plants, including cress, *sipu* and *kudimmus*, which were salt-like in their composition, to erode and henceforth curse these places' hopes for future reinhabitation. Unlike Carthage, these ancient cities have been overlooked in the popular imagination, and their geographies are part of a global mythos of dead cities. To be sure, Hong Kong will remain habitable, but for a place where people have historically sought political refuge, for *whom* the city is habitable, it will change. It used to be a privilege to leave, but for those already in exile, fearing arrest if they return and some even ex-communicating their families to protect them, their abrupt departure from Hong Kong marks the loss of their home they can never return to.

Mourning Hong Kong also reckoned with an anticipatory kind of grief for a loss yet to come. Has the end happened? Is it occuring now? Naming the end itself is a speculative effort; people have different opinions of what constitutes an "end," and the experience was uneven. For those who couldn't refute the death of Hong Kong, the circumstances of their lives evidenced the "end": many saw no future

* Ridley, R. T. "To Be Taken with a Pinch of Salt: The Destruction of Carthage." *Classical Philology*, vol. 81, no. 2, 1986, pp. 140–146., doi:10.1086/366973.

for their children here and were planning to emigrate or encourage their kids to; some were jailed or charged and awaiting sentencing; some were disappeared; some already fled Hong Kong as exiles. Others didn't see it as an end, but as a beginning. Life still goes on, and will of course continue for those who choose to stay. There was a sense that mourning, or even calling this the "end of Hong Kong" foreclosed a possibility for the future or for life in any way, especially the potential for resistance. Yet, no one has the power to end a contract with grief. Denial is part of its process.

Categorizing a feeling does not foreclose its futurity. A profound sense of loss emerged, regardless of our refusal to call it the "end" or a "death" or "mourning." Naming grief has the power to legitimize a common pain, and to do so isn't to claim a sense of defeat or negate the possibility for life to flourish or for resistance to take new forms—but rather, to give language to an invisible system of feelings in which we live. It holds a light that what guides our everyday experience, which is only felt somatically before language gives it the power to enter the written record. It brings pain and suffering into visibility in its best approximate name: we are "mourning" a city.

"You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world," James Baldwin once said. "But then you read.

[It] taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive."* Perhaps it is hubristic to claim that we can live on, that we demand witnesses, for especially now, so many populations die in secret and face those conditions without such attention. The ongoing political crisis makes a sinister point about the times we are entering: there are those who cannot resist the exception to this rule of being forgotten along the timeline of history, who have few or no witnesses. Their voices are silenced by the abyssal line of disappearance.

If a city that is the fourth-largest stock exchange in the world can unravel, then Hong Kong presents a riddle about the tight relationship between capital and crisis.† I used to think that capital would protect a city from falling into political crisis, but in fact, it invites the most powerful spectators. From the people who fly in for dark tourism, the financial institutions who are shorting in the background, real estate groups speculating the consequences on the global luxury real estate market—Hong Kong is dying and its death became capital. In *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, writing on the relationship between the state and the technics of the image of September 11, Iain Boal and other authors assert, "States can behave like maddened beasts, in other words, and still get their way. They regularly do. But the present madness is singular: the dimension of spectacle has never before interfered so palpably, so insistently, with the business of keeping one's satrapies in order."‡ So while the valleys felt by the luxury real estate market forced investors to dump properties and seek luxury real estate elsewhere, multi-billion dollar blockbuster IPO's continued to make splashes on the Hong Kong stock exchange. Before the handover Deng Xiaoping famously assured the public that "horses will still run, stocks will still sizzle, dancers will still dance."§ In a time of political uncertainty felt across the city, it is telling that he aimed his statement to the public at investors, and this political talking point bore Hong Kong's essential, indeed its *only* lasting post-handover promise: it is the site for spectacle and capital. This is how the city will be consumed. Hong Kong and its position between empires lubricated the conditions for political entropy to enter into the realm of the spectacle.

* Howard, Jane. "Telling Talk From a Negro Writer." *Life Magazine*, 24 May 1963.

† "HKEX Fact Book 2018," Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing, 2018. https://www.hkex.com.hk/-/media/HKEX-Market/Market-Data/Statistics/Consolidated-Reports/HKEX-Fact-Book/HKEX-Fact-Book-2018/FB_2018.pdf?la=en

‡ Boal, Iain A., et al. *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*. Verso, 2005. 37.

§ Yu, Elaine. "Hong Kong Unrest Leads to Cancellation of Horse Races at Iconic Track." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 18 Sept. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/09/18/world/asia/hong-kong-protests-horse-races.html?auth=login-email.

3 Salting the Earth

Hong Kong's special status was inevitably going to end by or before 2047. To say Hong Kong will die is to read a historical "use by" date that loomed over us all, foretold by its legal architecture as a special territory. To call it a death is also to invoke lawmaker Claudia Mo's statement from 2016, declared when the two pro-democracy lawmakers, Baggio Leung and Yau Wai-ching, were disqualified from Parliament for their subversive swearing-in ceremony: this, she said, was "the beginning of the end of Hong Kong."*

It matters who calls it "the end" or "a death." When political pundits outside of Hong Kong did so, their claims evoked a territory lost on a geopolitical map. Between the years of the Umbrella Movement and 2019, I eavesdropped on foreign correspondents who left in pursuit of other bureaus, lamenting their work had dried up: *there's no story left here anymore*. The past year proved them wrong. But at the time, these off-the-record statements sounded like a threat. When the inevitable end came for Hong Kong's status as a special territory—if as a slow death—would it be spectacular enough for the news? When others claimed that Hong Kong was dead from afar, their implicit refusal to keep watching frustrated me.

For those who live here, or have ties to Hong Kong, to name a death is an attempt to scale the magnitude of events. On May 18th, 2020, pro-democratic lawmakers were forcibly pulled out of the legislative council for the vote on the anthem law. Some called it a coup. Claudia Mo tweeted, "A perfectly illegal meeting. A perfectly illegal election. Used to say it's the beginning of the end for Hong Kong. Now we're not just near the end, we are at the end."† When remarking on the death or the end of Hong Kong, we want witnesses.

These times demand that we reframe our assumptions about crisis narratives. At the very least, they demand that we rethink so-called "normalcy," or how the notion of peacetime has, or could have *ever,* existed in a colony or postcolony. Handed over from British rule, the teargas flag system endured as one of the defining rituals of violent policing in Hong Kong. A flash of flags before firing teargas and projectiles (if they even bothered to give warning beforehand)—the British followed this practice in the '67 riots in North Point and the Hong Kong police continued its legacy.‡ This symbolic mirroring of colonial

* Claudia Mo, "This is the beginning of the end of Hong Kong," The Guardian, November 7, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/07/this-is-the-beginning-of-the-end-of-hong-kong-china.

† Claudia Mo. Twitter Post. May 18, 2020, 1:19 PM. https://twitter.com/claudiamcmo/status/1262251352178098178

‡ "Vanished Archives: A Documentary on Hong Kong's 1967 Riots," Zolima Citymag, 2016. https://zolimacitymag.com/events/vanished-

and postcolonial political order also repeats itself in the legal warfare: the reinterpretations of Basic Law, dissolving of the separations of power and the conflicting, simultaneous definitions of Hong Kong as "separate" but also "part of" China. Using lawfare aggressively expressed what a bureaucratic, puppet government knew best—obsessive, meticulous, intentionally oblique dealings of assaults and obfuscation through fine print. Lawfare was meant to bore and exhaust, and every piece of new law that made the news occasioned a lag in time, waiting for a legal expert to weigh in.

The mask ban was invoked through a loophole in a colonial-era emergency ordinance. In times of trying to make sense of living through ongoing crisis through lawfare, we may be "tempted to look to the writings of Carl Schmitt," as the imperial law historian Lauren Benton states, "and the related theories of Giorgio Agamben" to understand the emergency measures.* Agamben and Schmitt build from a framework of the government's power to exterminate, undermine and revoke individual rights by creating, in Agamben's words, "states of exception," outside of the legal order. But Benton takes aim at these state-of-exception frameworks as an oversimplification, especially

archives-a-documentary-on-hong-kongs-1967-riots/.

* "Bare Sovereignty and Empire." *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900*, by Lauren A. Benton, Cambridge University Press, 2011. 282.

in a colonial context. A discussion of crisis and colonialism demands more nuance. The emergency ordinance, even during the colonial era, was criticized as draconian. In 1968 Henry Litton, the former secretary of the Hong Kong Bar Association's committee, foreshadowed the law's vulnerability to exploitation. In a letter to *the Times* in 1968, he wrote, "The evil of the Emergency Regulations is that it leaves it to the benevolence of the Hong Kong government to observe the basic principles of the rule of law without making it a legal requirement."† The appeal was unsuccessful, and the emergency ordinance carried over into Basic Law of Hong Kong after the handover. Measures of political repression like the mask ban are subsumed in a legal system that maintained a colonial legacy. Legal warfare put these systems into sinister motion. To borrow the words of Martin Lee, (nicknamed the "father of democracy" in Hong Kong), to invoke de facto martial law was only a matter of conscience, as thin as a "paper door."‡

The postcolony bears the imprint of its former shell. Colonialism can be compared to corporate entities (to use an uneasy set of metaphors). They go through mergers and acquisitions. They migrate systems from one holding to another. They are clever and cunning at using

† Gary Ka-wai Cheung, *Hong Kong's Watershed: The 1967 Riots*, Hong Kong University Press, 2009. 85.

‡ Kondo, Dorinne, et al. *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2001. 207.

fine print. And they are experts in the tactics of obfuscation. Functioning in remote offices, the leadership of the viceroys remains at its most effective as bureaucratic. Many components of the old order remain intact: from Basic Law, to the teargas warning system, to more innocuous forms, like the city's sidewalk design. Lawfare in a postcolony illuminates how "histories of imperial law tell another story" contrary to the state of exception—that colonial law, as Benton imagines it, is a warped landscape and timeline of "overlapping, semi-sovereign authorities within empires [generating] a lumpy juridical order."* This juridical "lumpiness" manifested in examples like the mandatory mask-wearing for COVID-19 compounding the ongoing mask ban. These proliferating examples take on even more sinister forms, as specters of legal terror that this text intentionally speaks around. Lawfare was Hong Kong's "death by a thousand cuts."

In other terms, "death" possesses the potential to germinate a radical reframing of history. "Apocalypse" originates from the Greek word for "uncovering" or "revelation."† In Adam Khalil and Bayley Sweitzer's science-fiction thriller *Empty Metal*, an Indigenous character posits, in voice-over, "The end of the world, on the other hand, is a matter of perspective. Most people

* Benton, "Bare Sovereignty and Empire." *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900*. 290.

† Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

think the end of the world is going to come for everyone at the same time. For us, the end of the world happened a long time ago."‡ In identifying with the language of Indigenous and Black liberation, to call this "the end" demands that we animate our historical oppression into a means of agency, to see our struggles as entangled with other timelines. The settler-colonial mercantile economy unfurls as a series of receipts. Historian Lisa Lowe describes the flows of this supply chain: "...fabrics woven, dyed, and painted in India and China were exchanged for African slaves shipped to the Americas, and those in which opium, grown, processed, and packaged in India, was exchanged for Chinese workers sent around the world."§ Along with the genocide and land-theft and genocide of Indigenous peoples, these economies mapped bodies, labor and goods onto a seabound continuum of colonial capital.

The danger of drawing the relations with the genocide of Indigenous people and the transatlantic slave trade—from which radical notions of futurism is born within Black and Indigenous struggles—would be remiss to flatten these histories. Hong Kong's crisis and its historical legacy of colonialism is vastly different from these other violent histories of genocide and

‡ Khalil, Adam and Bayley Sweitzer, directors. *Empty Metal*. Factory 25, 2018.

§ Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke University Press, 2015. 84.

slavery. Hong Kong has the exterior appearance of a metropole: Financial and cultural capital, it is a hyper-consumerist and capitalist city. Special economic zones are legal and tax loopholes, whereby as a port city Hong Kong lubricated the exchange of coolies, opium, global luxury real estate and stocks. When global capital is the rule, this great unseeable weight, endowed by interests elsewhere, bears down on the city. Signs of pressure emerge as cracks. Alongside one of the hottest luxury real estate markets was an ongoing housing crisis. An estimated 200,000 people lived in caged homes, sometimes called "coffin homes," named for their size comparable to a coffin.* A spate of teen suicides between the years of 2015 to 2017 illuminated both the city's insufficient mental public health resources and an education system built only to cook overwhelming pressure. During the peak of the summer, scrawled all over the city in graffiti lay exactly the stakes of the frontliners: "7k for a house like a cell and you really think we out here scared of jail?"† Global financial capital in Hong Kong heated the disparity between classes to extremes, and the tale of two cities was evident in one that didn't live in a cloud of teargas and that that did. Six months into the protests, "[t]he police said they have used around 16,000 tear gas rounds, 10,000 rubber bullets, 2,000 bean bag rounds, as well as 1,850 sponge grenades since June."‡ These assaults never visited some neighborhoods, especially affluent ones like the Mid-levels and The Peak, and among this class were individuals who only ever saw the protests through the local network news or perhaps merely in passing as a traffic jam. To them, the protests looked nothing more than destruction of property, a risk to law and order and an ongoing inconvenience and disruption. "If we feel that things are calm," asks Jasbir Puar, "what must we forget in order to inhabit such a restful feeling?"§ In maintaining the "restful feeling," what must those who live outside these "end worlds" do to afford forgetfulness? Hong Kong poses a distinct type of colonial extraction, constructed on the premise of "liberal ideas of free trade and government." Hong Kong forms its own version of a "death-world." That this is the "end of Hong Kong" is to see this city as part of a global colonial historical timeline of "apocalypse" in sequence.

A popular epithet in the protests stated that "Hong Kong was on the frontlines of a global battle against authoritarianism,"—and while this line was used politically in different ways, it does point to a historical fact. Global policing

* Taylor, Alan. "The 'Coffin Homes' of Hong Kong." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 16 May 2017, www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/05/the-coffin-homes-of-hong-kong/526881/.

† @fulgur_irruptiv, Twitter post, August 2020, 5:10 p.m., https://twitter.com/fulgur_irruptiv/status/1161203274650771456?s=21

‡ Cheng, Kris. "Hong Kong Police Used Crowd Control Weapons 30,000 Times since June; over 6,000 Arrested." *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, 31 Mar. 2020, hongkongfp.com/2019/12/10/hong-kong-police-used-crowd-control-weapons-30000-times-since-june-6000-arrests/.

§ Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press, 2017. xxvi.

and surveillance was first tested and refined in the colonies. As political scientists Elia Zureik and Mark B. Salter state, "European empires used the colonies to experiment with methods of social control," while the United States "practiced extralegal methods of surveillance in the 'penal colonies' by engaging in both outlaw practices in the mother country and at the same time by exporting other methods of social control…to US prisons, as occurred in the prisons of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib." To borrow the framing of "apocalypse" aims at a more capacious historical reading of colonialism as a global continuum of violence and trade, aligning myriad threads of colonial histories into simultaneous viewing. We must do the radical work of restoring these connective points between our written and oral histories. How do we make sense of our ongoing timelines?

Apocalypse is manifold and concurrent. It is uneven among populations around the world. It is police states. It is borders. It is concentration camps and so-called "re-education" camps. It is pandemics, and governments that allow by negligence and incompetence pandemics to kill its people. It is legal warfare. It is ecological collapse. To invoke Achille Mbembe, they are circumstances in which people live under the status of non-humans, and as the "living dead."* It is not that the apocalypse only happens to some

* Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press, 2019. 92.

populations—but rather, that some groups, and nations, afford to buy more time in our expiring world. In 2014, an RTHK broadcaster said, "There was a time when we lived in Hong Kong. Now we live in a place called Hong Kong."† Here, on this timeline, the postcolony lives on as a specter.

From a colonial entrepôt to a special economic zone, Hong Kong was a territory constructed for extraction at the nexus of transnational economies, spanning eras of shifting world orders. As the proverbial serpents of this *axis mundi* asphyxiate the city, Hong Kong the postmodern nexus unravels as a node in the balance of global finance. That these conditions lay waste to a global city, can arise out of any financial center, shows that the "death" of Hong Kong is one among many cities, and more to come. The fall of global cities in the age to come guarantees this pattern: that capital makes entropy spectacular, and the spectacle is a weapon.

† Yuen Chan. Twitter Post. August 28, 2020, 9:17 PM. https://twitter.com/xinwenxiaojie/status/1299335268508594176

It was only in a very recent past that the Hong Kong skyline was synonymous with global finance. It often appeared as a visual shorthand in advertisements for banking or travel. "Hong Kong: Asia's World City." I remember watching an ad on the plane when I was en route from Hong Kong to [redacted] in June, feeling the serrated edge of that shift.

At a 茶餐廳 (*cha tsan teng*) eating breakfast alone, I overheard an elderly man at the table next to mine say to his friend, "香港撞咗邪, 已經傷咗啦. 香港死啦." *Hong Kong came into collision with a demonic force. It was already unwell, and now Hong Kong will surely die.*

I had stopped getting my period at all since getting an IUD, but in those months I experienced breakthrough bleeding and observed a rusty discharge in my panties. Intense menstrual cramps gripped my uterus, and my lower abdomen felt as if containing a liquid substance simultaneously boiling and gurgling

inside of me. My friend D[redacted] asked me in the fall if I had experienced any problems with my "M," a Cantonese colloquialism referring to menstrual periods. "I ask because, P[redacted]'s friend who's been out there a lot—also exposed to teargas—has been noticing some strangeness with her cycles. I was wondering if you had experienced the same."

A year after that conversation with D[redacted], I came across an article published by Physicians for Human Rights in Bahrain from 2012.* It detailed the consequences of toxic chemical agents on reproductive systems, including abnormal menstrual periods. The report quoted a nurse at Salmaniya Hospital who asks, "There are many, many miscarriages. We believe the miscarriage rate has increased, although there is no quantitative evidence. What I want to know is: what is this gas...and what will be the future complications?"

* Physicians for Human Rights, *Weaponizing Tear Gas: Bahrain's Unprecedented Use of Toxic Chemical Agents Against Civilians*, August, 2012. https://www.thenation.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Bahrain-TearGas-Aug2012-small.pdf

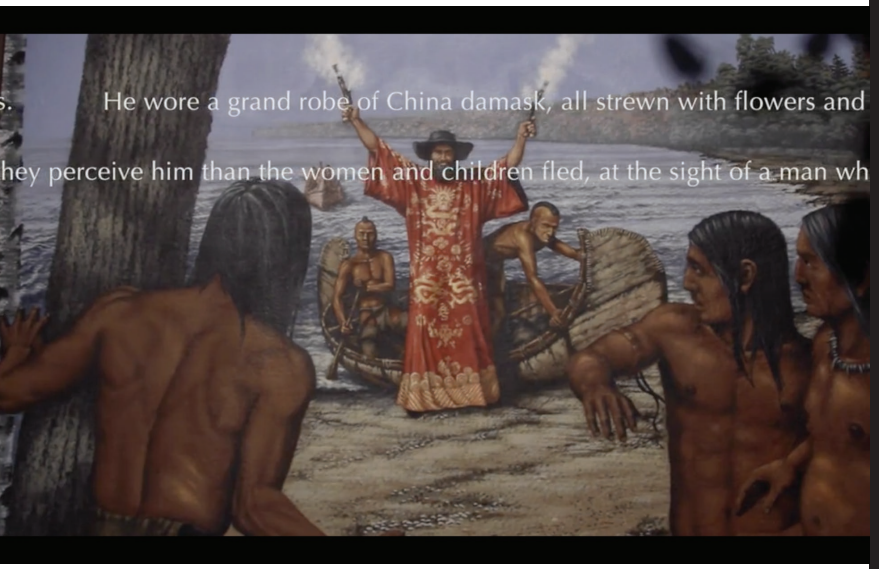
In the earliest dream I remember, I wake.

Imagine that you are in a foreign country. Since you are going to be in this place for some time, you are trying to learn the language. At the point of commencing to learn the new language, just before having started to understand anything, you begin forgetting your own. Within strangeness, you find yourself without a language.

It is here, in this geography of no language, this negative space, that I can start to describe bodybuilding. For I am describing that which rejects language.

Kathy Acker*

* "Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body." *Bodies of Work: Essays*, by Kathy Acker and C. Carr, Serpent's Tail, 2006. 21.



Still from Sky Hopinka's video Kunįkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunįkaga Remembers the Welcoming Song. Image courtesy of the artist.*

* Sky Hopinka, *Kunįkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunįkaga Remembers the Welcoming Song*, 2014. Video. 6:35. Video still.

Edward Said defines "contrapuntal reading" as way of interpreting canonical Western literature through the lens of colonial history: To read *Mansfield Park*, for example, with "an understanding of what is involved when an author shows…that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England."* Expanding further the framework of Said's contrapuntal reading, we can critically unsettle the perspective in the relationship not just between colonizer and colonized—but restore connections directly *between* colonized peoples through a radical reading of history. In the words of Lisa Lowe, "[diversifying] our practices to include a more heterogeneous group [can] enable crucial alliances…in the ongoing work of transforming hegemony."†

The 2014 film *Kunįkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunįkaga Remembers the Welcoming Song* assembles disparate memories and accounts by both Hočąk and the settlers of Red Bank. Directed by artist and filmmaker Sky Hopinka of the Ho-Chunk Nation, and descendent of the Pechanga Band of Luiseño people, the film tells the event of settler Jean Nicolet's landing, who in 1634 was the first European to arrive on the land that is present day Wisconsin. Lines of text unfurl one after another over the image of

* Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1993. 66.

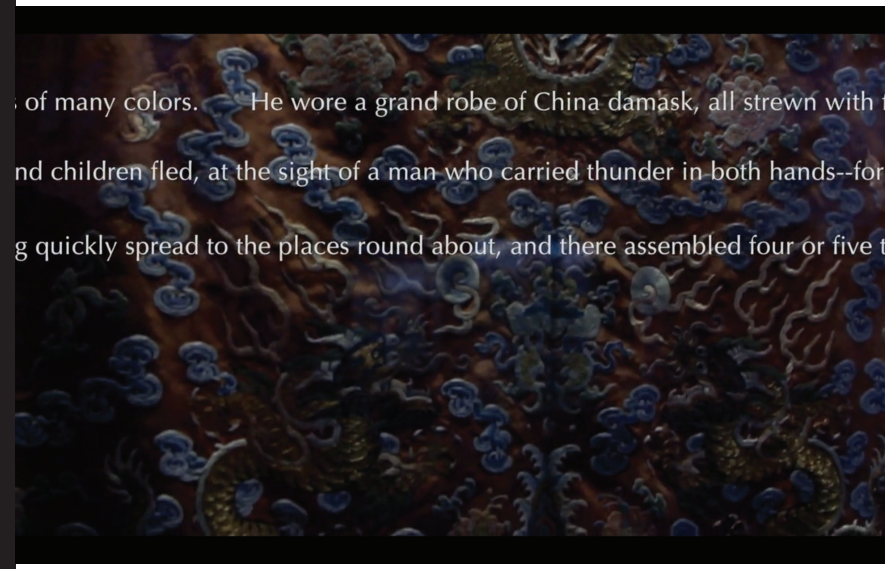
† Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Duke University Press. 1996. 83.

Jean Nicolet's arrival, his arms raised up and guns blazing. The first of these lines read: "He wore a grand robe of China damask, all strewn with flowers and birds of many colors." It is said that Nicolet was in search of the "Orient," but instead came to the Red Banks. "Thinking about how text is a source of information to understand different parts of our lives" Hopinka remarks, "is surreal."* The filmmaker animates text, rupturing the typical subtitle format, and these lines are choreographed in repeating, overwhelming scroll across the screen. Highly intentional about the employment of words in his films—they are, after all, the very artifacts of information he uses to recover the past—Hopinka was also inspired by a placard he found at a museum in Green Bay, Wisconsin, about Jean Nicolet. Words, across their myriad forms from written and oral tradition, are tantamount and construct historical monuments both physically and in our imagination.

Who was Jean Nicolet? And how did he get the China Damask robe? Why was he wearing it? In the 17th century, "China, not Europe," historian Timothy Brook argues, "was the center of the world in the Ming period."† Seduced by the

* Yerebakan, Osman Can. "Resisting Exploitation: Sky Hopinka Interviewed by Osman Can Yerebakan - BOMB Magazine." *Resisting Exploitation: Sky Hopinka Interviewed - BOMB Magazine*, bombmagazine.org/articles/resisting-exploitation-sky-hopinka-interviewed/.

† Brook, Timothy. *The Confusions of Pleasure Commerce and Culture in Ming China*. University of California Press, 2011. xvi.



Still from Sky Hopinka's video Kunįkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunįkaga Remembers the Welcoming Song. Image courtesy of the artist.*

* Sky Hopinka, *Kunįkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunįkaga Remembers the Welcoming Song*, 2014. Video. 6:35. Video still.

incredible promise of luxury and wealth in China, Jean Nicolet set out. "How he got his hands on a Chinese damask robe woven with flowers and multicolored birds we do not know," Brook states.* It was during this era that Europe had an insatiable appetite for fine commodities such as porcelain, silks and teas from China. This huge market demand accelerated a steep silver deficit, draining the global economy's silver to China. The East India Company amassed a debt so great by the 1790s, over a century later after Nicolet's failed attempt towards his fantasy to trade with China, that they "improvised an elaborate, layered opium trade, despite the Qing government's explicit prohibition," leveraging resources in other colonies such as India for "cultivation, production, and packaging of opium."† In the early 1800s, the British owned most of the market share of the opium trade, but Americans also had their hand in the market too, owning up to ten percent of the total market.‡ In fact, "[t]here was an unwitting dependency in Boston on profits from the opium trade," historian Elizabeth Kelly Gray states.§

* Brook. *The Confusions of Pleasure Commerce and Culture in Ming China*. xv.

† Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke University Press, 2015. 103.

‡ Bebinger, Martha. "How Profits From Opium Shaped 19th-Century Boston." How Profits From Opium Shaped 19th-Century Boston | CommonHealth, WBUR, 31 July 2017, www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2017/07/31/opium-boston-history.

§ Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke University Press, 2015. 103.

"The ships sailed from Massachusetts shores to Turkey, where they bought opium; from Turkey to China, where they sold the drug; and from China to Boston, loaded with tea, porcelain and silk."¶ The British weaponized a narcotics trade to successfully reverse a silver drain, and "the distribution of the highly addictive drug," Lisa Lowe states, "induced docility and dependence [that] targeted the biology of the Chinese population."** Merchants and officials across China, gripped by opium addiction, were powerless to this takeover. The injuries of mass addiction penetrated Chinese society and was critical in writing Chinese people as a lesser, exploitable race: "Colonial governors conceived the Chinese as if they were a plentiful, tractable form of labor that could alternately oppose, replace, or supplement slavery; colonial police and criminal courts represented the Chinese as diseased addicts, degenerate vagrants, and prostitutes."†† This crisis fomented the Opium Wars. And that resulted with the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, ceding a port territory "in perpetuity" to Britain. These cumulative events led to the establishment of the Crown Colony of Hong Kong.‡‡

¶ Bebinger, Martha. "How Profits From Opium Shaped 19th-Century Boston."

** Lowe. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. 103.

†† Lowe. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. 127.

‡‡ Carroll, John M. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007. 239.

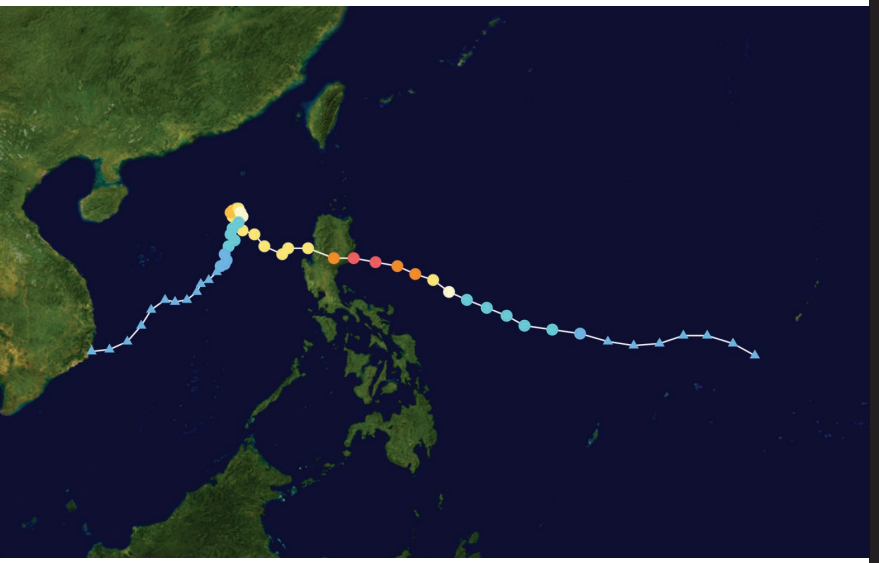
The second line of the scene in Hopinka's film *Kunįkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunįkaga Remembers the Welcoming Song* reads, "No sooner did they perceive him than the women and children fled, at the sight of a man who carried thunder on both hands—for thus they called the two pistols that he held. The news of his coming quickly spread to the places round about, and there assembled four or five thousand men." In Hopinka's film, the scrolling texts begin unfurling over a shot of the water. Then reeling across a mural. And the text unfurls over a China damask robe on display in a museum. These are piece-meal artifacts of the story. Poetic images, others depictions. A combination of shared and personal memory in incessant attempts towards recovering and remembrance. The "Orient" posed such an irresistible and tantalizing fantasy it brought Jean Nicolet and other settlers onto the shores of the Red Banks. He was not the only settler who in the quest for Asia came to the Americas: So had Christopher Columbus. A metaphor borrowed from music, to radically read contrapuntally these lines of history claims a restoration of the geographically-dispersed and total span of the settler-colonial mercantile supply chain. Hopinka states the raison d'être of this epistemic recovery that his film *Kunįkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunįkaga Remembers the Welcoming Song* essentially activates, "The lineage of oral Indigenous history has been lost through schooling systems, Indian wars, and reservations."* Each independent line of histories of peoples emerges on this continuum. These lines may be diametric but are played, like lines in music, simultaneously and in accomplice.† There lies a radical possibility of making these connections across our written and oral histories known: To restore knowledge from the detritus of our disparate, concurrent timelines.

My Uncle B[redacted] once said, "Hong Kong has always been a controversial place ever since I was a kid. Many external factors in the world converge on this small place. It eventually matters."

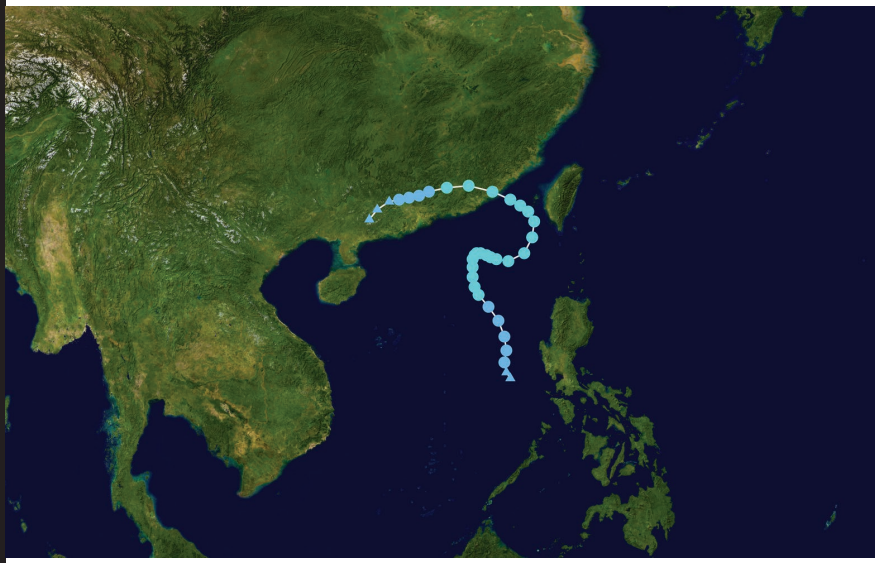
"Li's Force Field" or 李氏力場 (*lei si lik cheung*) names a conspiracy theory in Hong Kong. It concerns the existence of a meteorological force field surrounding the city summoned by the power of local business tycoon Li Ka-shing. The theory claims that Li's political power over Hong Kong is so great that he has the ability to repel subtropical typhoons above the number 8 storm signal on weekday mornings, thereby preventing the shutdown of schools and business across the

* Yerebakan, Osman Can. "Resisting Exploitation: Sky Hopinka Interviewed by Osman Can Yerebakan - BOMB Magazine."

† Indigenous Action Media, *Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex: An Indigenous Perspective*. 2014.



Map of the path of Typhoon Cimaron from 2006

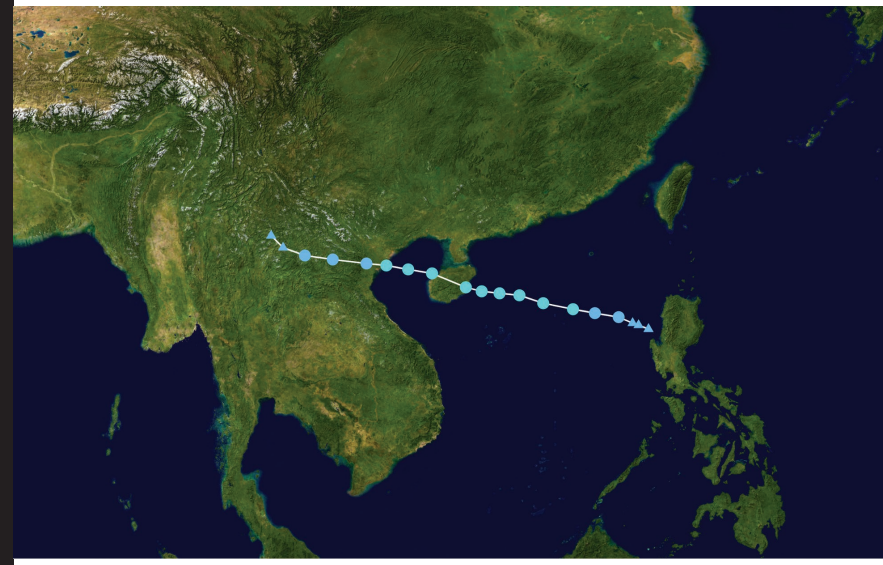


Map of Tropical Storm Lionrock from 2010

city. Li does indeed have incredible influence over the city's Commerce and Economic Bureau, which oversees the Hong Kong Observatory. The theory endows those with great financial power here with nearly metaphysical power to will our weather autonomous zone over Hong Kong. Typhoon signals of that magnitude were only called on weekends or in the afternoon, to the lament of white-collar workers and students. People still begrudgingly went to school and work in the blustering wind and rain, and the weather graphics showed typhoons that swerved out of Hong Kong. In 2020, a number 8 typhoon was called a mild and nearly windless morning that was hardly windy at all. On a map, Typhoon Nangka barely even swerved away from Hong Kong, on a nearly linear north-westerly path, fomenting over the South China Sea near the Philippines and then moving towards Hainan as it dissipated. Barely hit by a peripheral band of the storm, Nangka was the farthest Signal No. 8 warning from Hong Kong since 1960.* The signal was hoisted the night before, shutting the city down. Li's political influence was waning.

A few years ago, Uncle C[redacted] said, "Hong Kong is the money laundering capital of the world." Real estate investments, stocks, logistics

* Coconuts Hong Kong (October 13, 2020). "Tropical storm Nangka is farthest No. 8 typhoon from Hong Kong in 60 years". coconuts.co. Retrieved October 13, 2020.



Path of Typhoon Nangka

planning, went unseen in these months, but gathered momentum in discussions among business circles, between friends and families planning ahead. L[redacted] told me early on that she had moved the majority of her cash to her account in the US. W[redacted] and T[redacted], who had left back in August, were already in the process of doing the same, and had begun talking to their financial advisor. *No doubt there's a currency crisis brewing.* We can frame business discussions as a type of oral tradition, as rituals in the public sphere, often occurring in private spaces, that move around capital and power. They are the wet fingers in the winds of the global market. The oral tradition of business discussions occurs between wholesale fruit sellers, it is the discussions between merchants who have since been part of the culture of the colonial entrepôt for hundreds of years. The negotiation of capital as oral traditions happen on golf courses. It happens at dinners. And upon these sites of exchange, the oral tradition of capital, the propellers of logistics and the engineers of material things—cash as liquid—rule our world.

The youngest person to get arrested was only eleven.* Out there, when these kids fully geared up (especially during the summer), I failed to

* Adolfo Arranz, "Arrested Hong Kong Protesters: how the numbers look one year on," South China Morning Post, June 11, 2020, https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/news/hong-kong/article/3088009/one-year-protest/index.html.

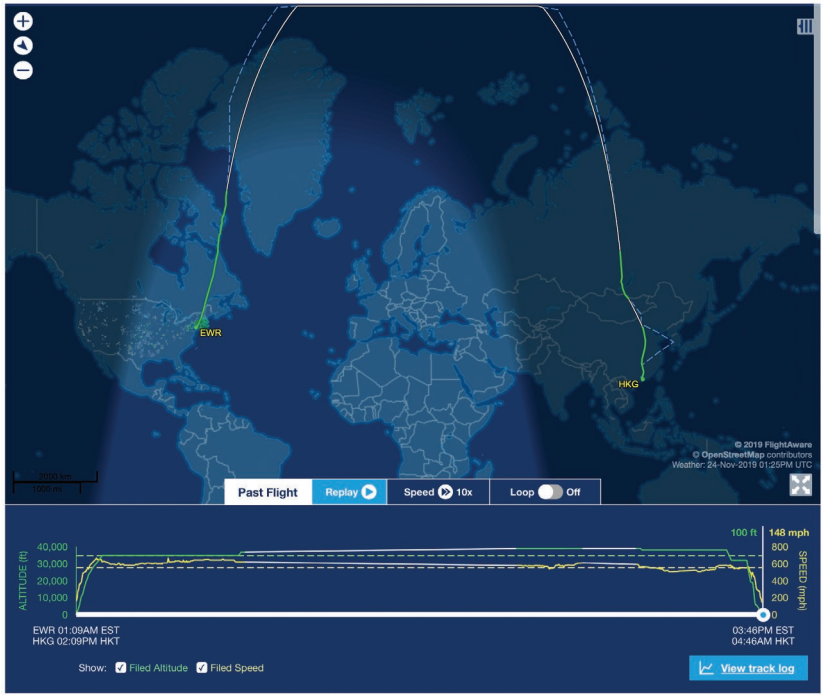
really grasp how young they were. It was easy in those months, in the deluge of information, the intense myth-making and apocalypse-porn of circulating imagery, to lose sight of the weight of individual humanity that comprised such a huge movement. It was not until these frontliners returned to school—after what some called "the long summer of discontent," donning uniforms in a schoolyard, that their youth became painfully clear. One leaked video showed a school assembly, all the faces blurred, singing the school anthem. The students break suddenly from the anthem into protest chants, a refrain they all knew together but could only share with each other anonymously at the frontlines. I don't know how to describe this heartbreak, to convey the feeling for all of us living this nightmare, than to realize the innocence of children, revealed in a change from black clothing and full frontline gear of helmets, gas mask and backpacks to school uniforms and backpacks full of books and binders. I imagine the sight of these school children chills the authorities the most: a curse across families and generations of discontent to come.

In 2014, I watched the umbrella protests from afar while at the same time participating in the Black Lives Matter marches in New York. In 2015,

when the booksellers were disappeared, the US presidential candidates were campaigning. In 2016, the lawmakers were pulled from parliament around the same time that Trump was elected. The incident when the billionaire was abducted from Hong Kong and the Women's March in DC happened within ten days of each other. After graduating college, besides living in Hong Kong for a year after, I had only come back once, in 2015. When I moved back to Hong Kong in February of 2018, I told many, including my parents, that I had come back for a job. But actually, I just wanted an excuse to return. I knew this place would be increasingly unfamiliar. I think it might seem romantic that I wanted to come back, but I felt compelled because the events that accelerated the timeline in Hong Kong gave me what could most closely be described as jetlag. I always knew what time it was here when I was in New York. And the news events just made it harder for me to sleep. It was as if my body was already in motion to catch up to Hong Kong time.

An estimated 800,000 people emigrated out of Hong Kong before the 1997 handover.* My family was one of these numbers, but my dad was mostly based in Hong Kong throughout. I only discovered that our particular family situation was not unique upon reading sociological texts in college. He was, in textbook terms, an

* Sussman, Nan M., *Return Migration and Identity: A Global Phenomenon, A Hong Kong Case*. Hong Kong University Press, 2011. 6.



Screenshot of flight path on February 10, 2018

"astronaut father": a parent who travels between another country and Hong Kong for work. Nan S. Sussman, professor of cross-cultural psychology, states that out of 800,000 people who left before handover, "since 1997, an estimated 500,000... have returned to Hong Kong, as citizens of Canada, Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom" and other places. The number of return diaspora makes up 83% of those who emigrated, which is approximately 7% of the total population of Hong Kong.* By 2012, my parents had both relocated to the U.S. permanently. Hong Kong became increasingly unfamiliar to me every year thereafter. I had no clear excuse to return, only extended family and some friends, and balancing limited vacation days from my job. I experienced the recent political changes of the city solely through the news. But in the last few years, I wanted to be here for it and to witness it, whatever "it" was. No one had any idea it would be like this. Living dual or simultaneous crises demands that one sees connections.

Cops chased a friend of mine on his way back from work late at night for wearing all black. On another night, a cop pulled a pistol on one of my friends to chase her off a footbridge, where no journalists were present to document it, when she was walking back home from dinner with

* Sussman. *Return Migration and Identity: A Global Phenomenon, A Hong Kong Case*. 34.

me. I found myself on quiet streets walking past a police van on multiple occasions with cops all turning their bodies to look at me as I walked half a block away to board a minibus. In Hong Kong, I matched the "type": of a certain age bracket, fit and dressed in black. My friend suggested I should replace my wardrobe and wear other colors. Walking on an empty street, I tried not to look or notice as a police van slowed down to watch me on an empty street. 鹹濕佬 (*harm sap lou*).† Like the dogs they are, I tried not to make eye-contact with them. I described these events over the phone to my friend S[redacted] in New York when we caught up. "Ever since I was a young girl," she said. "I have always been aware of every cop around me. Every street I walked on. I learned as a young Black girl how to walk around cops. And how to look at them." This was, as it is for many Asian-Americans, not my experience of policing in the United States. When asked to compare the two political situations between Hong Kong and the US, I would say, one is a de facto police state. The other is a racially segregated police state.

I struggled to balance talking about this with friends in New York as a means of coping, without inviting comparisons between the two places that would be misconstrued as flattening or diminishing. "Which cops are worse?" Usually white friends would ask me this question. Knowing these facts intellectually didn't prepare

† Refer to glossary.

me for truly grasping how the threat of violence penetrated the banal, wove into my psyche and my body. Residing in this space, you embody the abrupt atmospheric transition of being interpellated and surveilled by different states. Textures of fear describe their own countries.

"A melting pot" tells an attractive fantasy. Nandita Sharma writes, "as empires were rapidly dismantled and their former colonies–and later, their European metropoles–were replaced by nation-states."* This is the creation of what she describes is the "new postcolonial global hierarchy based on one's nationality."† The legacy of bodies in a colonial-mercantile continuum iterate in borders across nationalities, race and political affiliations. I am a "good body." My family is "good bodies." When I was naturalized at 18, to pass my citizenship test, I had to answer correctly the questions, "Are you an anarchist? Are you a communist?" What bodies are granted an L-1 visa, asylum or are captured as fugitives at a border? For Asian-Americans, whose identity is not a monolith, our provisional status in the United States lies historically in the establishment of coolies as a way of creating unfree Chinese

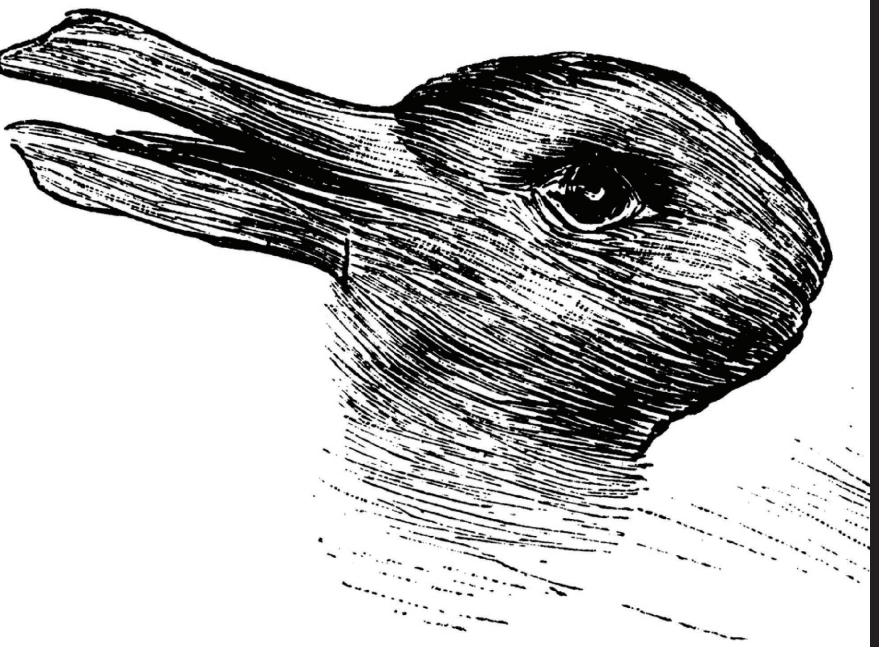
* Sharma, Nandita Rani. *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and The Separation of Natives and Migrants*. Duke University Press, 2020. 163.

† Sharma. *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and The Separation of Natives and Migrants*. 165.

labor around the world. The racial category of Asian-Americans rests in the politically liminal space between "good" and "bad" bodies. The "free" and "unfree." I don't know how to make sense of my eventual return to the metropole.

The duck rabbit poses an optical exercise. Look at it one way and you see a rabbit. Look at it another and you see a duck. But once you can see both animals, a third image also emerges: the vision of the duck and rabbit at the same time.

I have had a lifelong, perhaps unhealthy, relationship to the news. Growing up, my dad subscribed to most major newspapers (*The New York Times, The Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal, The New Yorker, The Economist, South China Morning Post, Apple Daily*), and wherever we would travel, he would always leave BBC World News or CNN on in the hotel room. As a teenager, he would chastise me if I missed a major headline, accusing me of not paying attention or being 離地 (*lei dei*), literally translating as "to be off the ground"—out of touch.



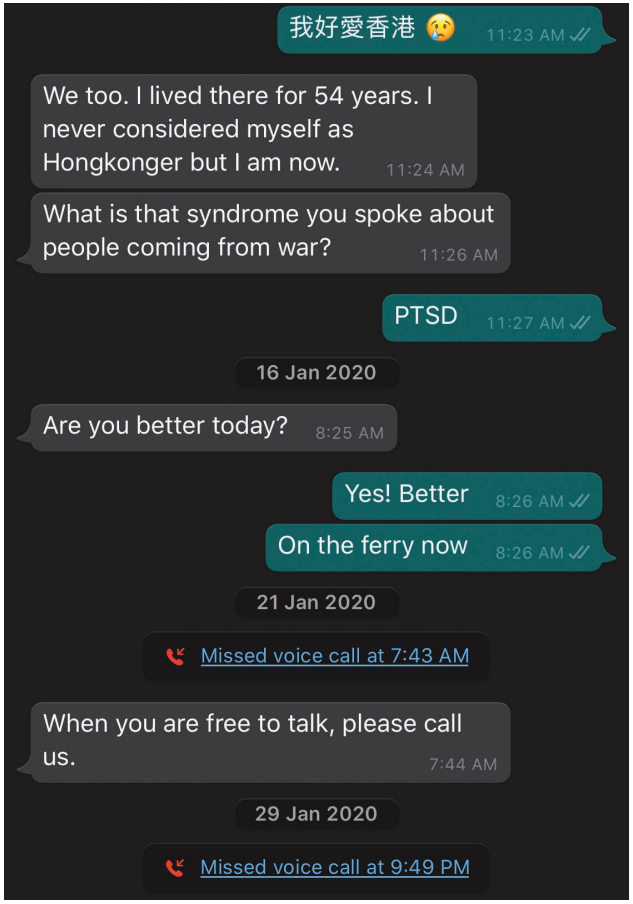
An illustration of the duck-rabbit*

* Farand, Chloe. "Duck or Rabbit? The Image That Tells You How Creative You Are." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 16 Feb. 2016, www.independent.co.uk/news/science/duck-or-rabbit-100-year-old-optical-illusion-tells-you-how-creative-you-are-a6873106.html.

I think about the term 離地 a lot in the context of being part of the Hong Kong diaspora. We are 離地 in the literal sense of being diasporic and figuratively off the ground. A lot of my friends in Hong Kong expressed their resentment towards Asian-Americans throughout these months, those who spoke about or were silent from afar about the protests. Or some who even lived here. "I was talking with J[redacted]." One friend confided, "We both agree that most Asian-Americans are white." Or another friend who lamented, "Asian Americans have proven again and again that they don't care about Asians." As diaspora, as an Asian-American in my case, we are by definition out of touch and out of sync with place, since our emigration already begins a process of unmooring. Our privilege to leave anytime and our attachment elsewhere already creates our detachment. The term 離地 haunts me. Once, my friend assured me over text, "Look man, a lot of my friends are from Asia/HK. Grew up abroad or spent time there, came back white." I guffawed. He continued, "Dude, you're a Hong Konger, to a tee." It felt like the deepest compliment, such meaningful validation, but it was hard for me to accept that title. It felt like an unstable category that I had to always earn. I could be to him a Hong Konger, but not to others.

Living here demands the act of retelling and translating these events. But our place of birth is accidental, and you can never fully disentangle from your attachments. It fuelled the obsessive task of bearing witness to this time. I started volunteering after the events of July 21. It brought me out into the field alongside other journalists, as I volunteered as a [redacted] out there, for hundreds of hours over many months [redacted]. I often wondered what any of the work would be worth, whether an independent inquiry would ever materialize, or if international standards of policing even had any political bearing. I also began unofficially fixing for journalists, setting up interviews with friends who were more "local" than I was. I did translation work to help get stories out. I texted my journalist friends to share personal anecdotes, and some would be used to help frame pitches. I straddled the roles of observer and participant, and I often thought of myself as just an antenna. But I became exhausted from translating and pleading for others to bear witness.

Towards the end of the night, at the protests, you would hear frontliners say "一起走 (*yat chai zao*)". *Let's leave together.* It was like a refrain at the end of each night for the frontliners to disperse safely and at the same time, not leaving any one person behind. I think about "let's leave together" a lot, especially as the actions have changed and



"I really love Hong Kong"
Texts with dad, January 2020

people emigrate or plan their moves. There will not be one place that we'll leave together to. And still, not all of us will or can leave. "[E]very diaspora," Glissant foreshadows, "is the journey from unity to multiplicity."*

Carrie Lam said that protestors had "no stake" in Hong Kong.† Her comment infuriated people, but by her own logic, she was right. Lam implicitly defined stakes in terms of economic stakeholding like stocks or real estate investments—something the majority of Hong Kong protestors did not have. The comment reveals something fundamental about the city's politics. Legible stakes are "capital." But stakes are also feelings. Stakes are immaterial, invisible and whatever you call home. This invisible attachment is tantamount and can break you just the same. Feelings are immaterial, passed down across generations. Passed between people whom you grow to love and with whom you share your community.

James Baldwin saw Hong Kong as a dizzying symbolic space-time continuum of speculative time zones, and posed that if you have a lover here, "you will always know what time it is in Hong Kong, for you love someone who lives there."‡ The ephemeral present and history, swirling in a typhoon of dreams, memory and longing, promises that Hong Kong, this place regarded from afar, can be known through longing. In longing, perhaps we find our belonging.

"Hong Kong will immediately cease to be a name and become the center of your life," Baldwin declared. "And you may never know how many people live in Hong Kong. But you will know that one man or one woman lives there without whom you cannot live."§ Stakes are feelings. They are held by the people who live outside of Hong Kong, who lose sleep watching the news half the world away. They are held by anyone who loves someone here.

My dad, recounting the day that he met my mother after the Hong Kong riots in 1967:

> *Life was very slow during that time. There were riots in Hong Kong orchestrated by underground communists in North Point, who were acting in conjunction with the Red Guards in China during the Cultural Revolution. The riot in Hong*

* Diawara, Manthia. "One World in Relation Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara." *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2011, 2011. 5.

† "Transcript of Remarks by CE at Media Session (with Video)." *The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*, 8 Aug. 2019, www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201908/09/P2019080900869.htm.

‡ Baldwin, James. "Nothing Personal," *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 6, Article 5, 2008. 59.

§ Baldwin. "Nothing Personal." 59.

Kong happened in 1967, and Hong Kong was in turmoil. My parents were discussing their options–to leave for Malaysia or Taiwan.

When it had quieted down, my father took up a job and left for Singapore in 1969. He worked there for two years as an operations manager for a company manufacturing men's undershirts. Due to pressure to make something of myself in those years, our relationship took on a formal exchange of letters, and I would write to him on weekends briefing him on my days, and one day I received a letter telling me to visit a new friend whom he made in business. He also mentioned that this man had a daughter, the kind of girl that he would like to see me end up with. I went to visit this person in haste, but my interest was more in his daughter, for obvious reasons.

I called to arrange a meeting with him, and I was told to go to his apartment. I arrived on time and was received at the door by a girl dressed in cheongsam. She led me into the living room to meet with her father. I hadn't been to a home with so many girls, and they filled up every corner of the room and took up every seat. He had ten daughters. Soon I was led by the man, whom I called Mr. Wong, and he told me to ride with him in his car to visit his factory. It was a Sunday afternoon.

We went all the way to Kwun Tong and he turned the radio up so loud while still trying to carry on a conversation with me. I entered a textile factory for the first time, where I saw braids being made cast-iron machines, and the labels being woven with wooden shuttle looms. It was hot, noisy and dirty. I accompanied him back to his home, but parted with him before entering the building of his apartment. Although he invited me to go up again, I politely declined, as the day had gotten too overwhelming for me.

History is inscribed in our bodies. Your body tells you about your grief in somatic form. Historical transition and everyday life wrestle each other in brutal force. The time of political decay is unlivable. There can no longer be one dominant way of processing time right now. To borrow Lisa Baraitser's words, "Time, it appears, is not flowing, but has become stuck, intensely felt, yet radically suspended."* To continue enduring, Baraitser poses the essential question, "How do we now 'take care' of time?"† Although I have no interest in ruminating in this metaphor, I was not immune to the irony that I worked in logistics for [redacted], a [redacted] company, for my day job. I was surrounded by watches and clocks. In watch ads, the products are always photographed with their faces displaying one particular time: 10:10. As an

* Baraitser, Lisa. *Enduring Time*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 183.

† Baraitser. *Enduring Time*. 2.

industry standard, this is the most photogenic time. Time is smiling.

Events those days felt like a foreshadowing, but when the big typhoon Manghkut hit in 2018 and toppled dozens of banyan trees all over the city, the sense of foreshadowing grew more insistent. Why were we all so sad about that? They were just trees, but Hong Kong people looked upon them like ancestors, and for a city defined by transience, the trees had conveyed a sense of time in their sublime and sprawling roots that unfurled through concrete streets and walls. When these trees fell during Mangkut, Hong Kong made international news for weathering one of the biggest storms of the year. And besides ripping through one flimsy new glass building, puncturing windows and sending the papers inside of it airborne, the city withstood the intensity of the storm well. People were told to go back to work the next day. The massive cleanup, including 17,000 uprooted trees,* that concluded in just a few days testified to the city's efficiency. But the banyan trees did not. During the super typhoon, the falling of each banyan tree felt like the toppling of an ancient monument. In them, Hong Kong people saw heritage, and like the face of Lion's Rock, our spiritual ancestors.

* Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, eds., *The Bataille Reader.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. 318–19.

An ideological shift was already in the process of passing. Given the prevailing local culture of superstition and reverence for unseen metaphysical forces, I wondered how, or if, we could see these as physical manifestations of ideological shifts. The notion of loss, of expiration dates, of dead paradigms in the face of new order is so baked into Hong Kong's emotional vernacular. The weather manifested a prescient vision. I imagined these banyan trees and their roots to be one of the features of Hong Kong as this failed *axis mundi* of the postmodern world, coupled with the city's escalators, which descend and ascend all across the city, from subway systems to the outdoors. The trees were the first sign of Hong Kong's failure as the axis mundi. I told K[redacted] of my daydream about Hong Kong as the failed *axis mundi* of the postmodern world. He texted back an article about telepathic trees and the network of communication between them.

When my mom was a kid in Hong Kong, my grandfather, disregarding warnings to go outside during a typhoon, would take his eleven children (one son and ten daughters) out to watch trash getting blown about on the streets. They would ooh and aah. 無聊到死.†

† This phrase is so singular in Cantonese, I refuse to translate it.

When you land in Hong Kong, the salt in the air and humidity is thick and palpable. It has its own unique weight and smell. For anyone who has been here, even seeing a photograph of the Hong Kong skyline will evoke this feeling.

Georges Batailles states that sovereignty asserts itself in many ways. Transcending the legal categories of the geopolitics of states, Batailles argues for sovereignty's potential to ascend towards the metaphysical. He argues, the sovereign "is the world in which the limit of death is done away with...the sovereign is he who is, as if death were not...He has no more regard for the limits of identity than he does for limits of death, or rather these limits are the same; he is the transgression of all such limits."* Interpreting Batailles, Achille Mbembe concludes, "sovereignty definitely calls for the risk of death."

* Mbembe, Joseph-Achille. *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press, 2019. 70.

Still from "The Way of the Intercepting Fist" (1971)*

* Longstreet. "The Way of the Intercepting Fist." YouTube Video, 2:02. September 16, 1971. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGJPF1c2GHE

LEE

What is your instinct?

MIKE

To pray!

LEE

In this position your arms are useless.

MIKE

Yeah.

LEE

You could kick or stomp.

MIKE

[Coughs] No.

LEE

Then, if you wish to survive. What do you do?

MIKE

I don't know!

LEE

Bite!

MIKE

Bite!?

LEE

Are we not animals?

MIKE

[coughs as Lee lets go of chokehold]

LEE

Are you alright?

MIKE

I can't find much evidence to the contrary, Lee.

LEE

Biting is efficient in close quarters. But don't make a plan of biting. It's a very good way to lose your teeth.

MIKE

So much to remember...

LEE

If you try to remember, you will lose. Empty your mind. Be formless. Shapeless. Like water. Now, you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. Put it into a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or creep or drip or crash. Be water, my friend.

MIKE

Why don't I just stand in front of Paul and recite that to him maybe he'll faint or drown?

LEE

When is it?

MIKE

Tomorrow.

LEE

You are not ready.

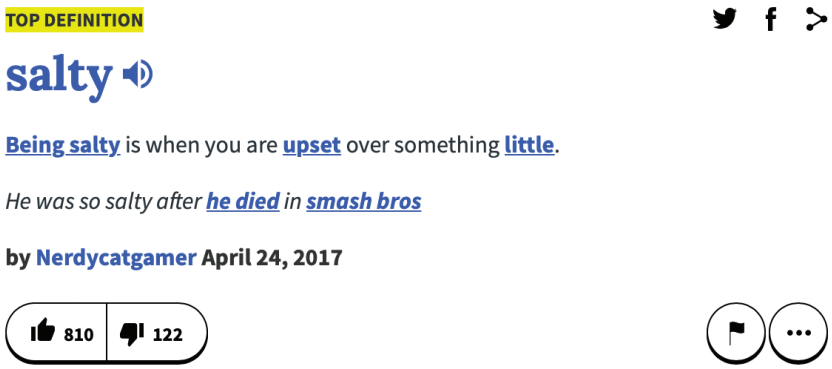
MIKE

I know.

LEE

Like everyone else, you want to learn the way to win. But never to accept the way to lose. To accept defeat, to learn to *die* is to be liberated from it. So when tomorrow comes, you must free your ambitious mind and learn the art of dying.

The political theory around the generative frameworks of death and sovereignty risks a potential recklessness. It might invite martyrdom if taken too literally. For a city that was already suffering from unconfirmed but anecdotal endemic psychological illness—depression, anxiety, insomnia—suicidal thoughts were not uncommon. And even early on, with the reports of the first suicides in Hong Kong, it was morally irresponsible to provide a martyrological framework. People wore kid gloves around this language in public for fear of setting off a trend among impressionable teenagers; they feared revealing any further precedent for politically-motivated suicides, which the teenagers explicitly expressed as acts of resistance. The theme of death was ubiquitous. It was present in the protest chants and conspiracy theories. Rites were burned at the scenes of protests over rumors—which hardened, for some, into fact—that the cops had killed people inside Prince Edward station and covered it up. Whether theoretical or



User definition of "salty" in Urban Dictionary*

* Nerdycatgamer. "Salty." *Urban Dictionary*, 24 Apr. 2017, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=salty.

real, so much in those months revolved around death. Those who had the gift of sight said they saw protestor spirits wandering around Prince Edward station, or following Carrie Lam at press conferences. In one particular YouTube video, a woman with the gift of sight pointed inside the shuttered station at Prince Edward to the empty set of stairs, asking, *Do you not see them? They are so faint. You can just barely see them.*[*]

Colonialism is lived: it is first and foremost a somatic and experienced fact, not a metaphor;[†] not a pedantic invocation towards a thesis or debate. The task of grasping the history of occupation and the fact of ongoing occupation in your hands lies in the urgency and necessity to shed light on its gaping absence in our oral histories, where perhaps shame has belied it. Achille Mbembe challenges that "[s]ocial theory has failed also to account for time as lived, not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absences, beyond the lazy categories of permanence and change beloved of so many

* "【9.13中秋節太子】(字幕)通靈阿婆肯定的說：她看到多個穿黑衣的冤靈。," 香港大紀元新唐人聯合新聞頻道, September 13, 2019. YouTube video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JX1RDUri9E&feature=youtu.be.

† Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education Society, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012. 1–40.

historians."* Political entropy is not a concise process. It shows internally. My interest in reading history and critical theory relentlessly in these months emerged from a struggle to find language I didn't have; I desired more clarity around my physical, and literally painful, experiences. I also wanted to reckon with the legacy of my family's own history—and how those legacies of power are poised to repeat themselves.

It became too easy for fear to take irrational flight as the long shadow of fear grew over Hong Kong. Our fears tell a historical legacy. Many who came in previous generations fled on boats, or even swam, to seek refuge in Hong Kong. My grandmother spent her dowry to flee on the train with my dad and his sister. My grandfather had already been exiled by then. As in my family, fear for those who will inherit these histories shows a transgenerational transmission of painful memories that people carry through their journeys of escape, and sometimes torture. Returning to Hong Kong and staying during this time, I confronted these latent fears.

In facing these times now, what is brave, and what is reckless? Each of these questions salts the personal sounds of trauma, making it impossible to form a rational response to ongoing times of terror. Making sense of risk—especially as a

* Mbembe, Achille. *On The Postcolony*. University of California Press, 2001. 8.

person who is not a famous activist or public figure—is difficult. The state is the most terrifying specter. Paranoia takes a leap of interpreting a political circumstance of terror from a place of justified fear to wild speculation, to see the news and to visualize it into a real threat to your life, made even more plausible with the trauma from family history. How does one know when a caution is pragmatic, and how does one know when it is paranoid? Facing this discernment is like shadow-boxing, toeing an invisible red line constantly in motion. Terror directs no rational system. It invites a "lawless, fenceless wilderness of fear," as Arendt describes, trapped in a space ruled by the "fear-guided and suspicion-ridden actions of its inhabitants."† This way of living demands a certain kind of hysteria.

I never met my paternal grandfather. I was born just a few years after he died, but I heard about his interrogations, which occurred nightly from when a car picked him up at 8PM and dropped him back off at his house at 8AM, and the ulcer that formed in his stomach thereafter, which plagued him for the rest of his life. Historical narratives play out in our bodies. Our bodies tell history's most violent ruptures.

Fear now began permeating the logic of all action—from very visible actions, like joining a protest, to more banal forms, like second-

† Arendt, Hannah. The Origins of Totalitarianism. The World Publishing Company, 1951. 466.

guessing packing saline in your bag on your commute in case you could be searched. Your mind takes a journey along a daisy-chain of possible outcomes wherever you are: on the subway, you visualize a list you could be on. From the frontlines, you picture being arrested. Half-asleep in your bed, you wonder if you hear a knock on your door at night to search your place. You think of the disappeared and where they are now. This experience is not rational. The evening doorknock echoed from my grandfather's time.

I am a child of the Pearl River Delta. I was born in Hong Kong in 1988, nine years before the handover. While my family is not indigenous to this territory, my lineage tells a series of accidents and violence that led to our arrival here. My great grandfather was likely the first person in my family to touch the Pearl River Delta. He was one of three brothers shipped to Malaya and "sold as piggies," as the the literal translation of 賣豬仔 (*mai zhu zai*) goes. My father described how an agent "recruited" his grandfather, growing up poor in Fujian, and traded him in a package deal along with his three brothers. My comprehension of this story changes depending on whether my father tells the story in Cantonese or writes it in English, which he had been doing for a year as a daily writing practice of committing our family history to words, offering a page every day, which he e-mails to my mom, my sister and I. In English, my father wrote that his grandfather worked to "earn his freedom."

"Was he a slave?" I asked. He refuted this term, and I asked if his grandfather was an indentured servant. "Perhaps?" But it only took me wading through historical writing to begin asking what 賣豬仔 truly meant in English.

I fished it out on Twitter. "Anyone know of English language scholarship around the economy of '賣豬仔' after the Opium Wars? Are they called slaves, indentured servants, or…? Appreciate any tips!" My Twitter mutual replied, "Lisa Lowe's 'The Intimacies of Four Continents' has a chapter on this in *The Ruses of Liberty.* Lowe uses the historical term 'coolies' and refers to these workers as indentured labourers."* Indeed, Lowe expands on the term "coolies," also referencing the scholarship of historian Moon-Ho Jung:

In the British colonial archive, one finds the term *coolie* used variously to refer to workers of both Chinese and South Asian origin who were imported to work in the West Indies, Cuba, Peru, Brazil, Australia, the western United States, Hawaii, Mauritius, South Africa, and Fiji. The great instability and multivalence of the term *coolie* suggests that it was a shifting, historically contingent designation for an intermediary form of Asian labor, used both to define and to obscure the boundary between enslavement and freedom, and to normalize both. As Moon-Ho Jung eloquently states, *coolies* "were never

* @piiikachung, Twitter post, August 13, 2020, 5:16 p.m. https://twitter.com/piiikachung/status/1293838706542026752?s=20

a people or a legal category. Rather coolies were a conglomeration of racial imaginings that emerged worldwide in the era of slave emancipation, a product of the imaginers rather than the imagined."*

My father tells that his grandfather had to pay an "agent's fee" in addition to the cost of his transport to Malaya to work as a hard laborer in open-pit mining. The trade in coolies, otherwise known as the "pig trade," was conducted by Chinese agents and American ship captains.† They tricked people desperate for work into relinquishing their freedoms and earning it back as debt. My dad's retelling includes nothing of the passage nor the working conditions my great grandfather faced – perhaps it is even obscured to him – but I glimpse it in historical texts. It is in the space of this absence that I can only infer: "Sometimes as many as 500 were crammed into the hold of a single ship and the men had hardly enough room to move around or lie down…as many as 40 percent of Chinese passengers died."‡

Once my great grandfather and his brothers had earned their freedom, they took money they had saved to buy one of these exhausted pits of land, thought to have been emptied of tin. And once at their destination, "…they usually did

* Lowe. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. 25.

† Agnew, Jeremy. *Alcohol and Opium in the Old West: Use, Abuse and Influence*. McFarland & Company, 2013. 82.

‡ Ibid.

not find the idyllic working conditions that they had anticipated…as a result, many of these men ended up working as virtual slaves until they were able to pay back the loan for their passage–if they ever could."§ With their newfound freedom, the three brothers built a hut on top of the piece of land. One morning—and this part seems of nearly mythic hyperbole to me—a thunderstorm brought a torrential rain that washed away the topsoil of the land, exposing the "silvery vein" they were living on top of. My father describes this moment in our family as "hitting the lottery."

There is an uneasy magic that happens in history writing, when your experiences suddenly become visible on a page (sometimes, and rarely now, news articles do this too): a revelation. As the adage goes, if you don't know history you are doomed to repeat it—but what are the consequences of learning it? But I do think there are other dangers in not learning history: that the doom of repetition is not history itself, but re-living the versions of your family's old traumas somatically, and the patterns repeat. Without reckoning with this pain, its meaning eludes you. It haunts you in your dreams.

§ Agnew, Jeremy. *Alcohol and Opium in the Old West: Use, Abuse and Influence*. 82.

In the earliest dream I remember, I wake. I am around six years old. It is nighttime. My dad and I are in a large public space to which the town has been evacuated. The only person awake, I crawl out of bed to reach the open door and look over the threshold into the valley below. The town rested in the glimmering lights, and there was a giant knight in full-body armor storming in silence, as if walking in slow-motion over invisible mud. I wake my dad up: *it's time to leave.* I think I knew my father's pain from my dreams before he felt like he could tell me. I had always wondered about why my hair was light brown. Family friends, even blunt acquaintances, would remark that I looked mixed: an awkward question for my mom when my dad did not disclose that he was adopted to anyone, not even to her family. "She looks like her father." I did. It wasn't until I was nine that the story, along with many others, came pouring out of my dad. A major fact about my dad stayed a secret until 1997.

I was born into a textile family. My father rode the wave of the industrial boom of the 1980s and 1990s, starting his career in a toy factory, pressing sheets of plastic into a hot metal machine, and then started his own small business with money my grandmother had left him. He was introduced to my mother. When both his parents passed away, my dad started a business with my mom in the mid-1980's, as a

As a child at a business meeting. Amsterdam, Netherlands. 1993.

sample room of twenty people in Kwun Tong, making the underwire for bras. Building their business over time and vertically integrating the manufacturing of lingerie, they rose to wealth. I spent my childhood summers trailing them on business trips. I would sit in their meetings and watch them negotiate and present products to companies in the UK, Germany, Switzerland, France and Italy. Our closest family friends were Italian. There was something *simpatico* between us: in the way my dad's Italian partners did business with a kind of directness, a crassness, a warmth and loyalty that reminded my dad of the way people negotiated and did business in Hong Kong. The Italians developed and made the fabrics and built the machines that knit the fabrics that my dad bought. They would admire each other's watches, traded jokes about Marco Polo and what came first, noodles or spaghetti. The dinner table was always loud with them, and it reminded me of my mom's family. I remember loud, hot machines knitting fabric from many spools of thread whirred overhead, pieces of lint flying in the fans in the air and sweeping across the floor. Factories smell of hot rubber and metal.

Something about the day Princess Diana was found in a car crushed into a heap of metal broke something in my father. He had also just learned that his business partner in Germany had died suddenly of a heart attack. In August of 1997, I accompanied my parents on a business trip to Paris. We arrived late at night at Charles de Gaulle, but as we lined up for a taxi to get to the hotel, the taxi operator refused to call one for us. He threw a fit and smashed his walkie talkie on the table, cursing in French. I didn't understand what was happening, but my parents were upset. The man continued fighting with his colleagues. I heard a familiar-sounding word: *Chinoise!* The next morning, jet-lagged, I woke up earlier than my parents and flipped through the channels to find cartoons. My dad woke up, and I asked him why I couldn't find the cartoons, only this repeated footage of a car on every channel. It was in French, and neither of us could understand until he realized something was wrong and we landed on a news broadcast in English announcing Princess Diana's death. The fatal accident was nearly exactly two months after the handover of Hong Kong.

My dad spent a lot of time crying that morning, and when he cried it felt like the entire atmosphere around me changed. As he lay in bed, he then told me a series of stories spanning several generations, beginning with the one about my great grandfather who was shipped off from Fujian along with his two brothers and sold to work in Malaysia as coolies, then about how my grandparents had survived the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, a story about food shortages and seeing a cat's skin hanging on a clothespin, my grandfather riding in a rickshaw when the Japanese "accidentally" dropped a bomb that stained my grandfather's white suit

Redacted image of Princess Diana from surveillance footage, in which she smiles at the camera

with the blood of the others who had stood closer to the blast, about how the Party deemed my grandfather an enemy of the state and chased him out of Shanghai, how my grandmother had escaped Shanghai with him and his sister in tow, selling their furniture and spending her dowry on a train along the way to Hong Kong. My lineage traces the violent arcs and the economic peaks of this region. And because of this legacy, at a young age my parents were not heavy-handed about much, but repeated this lesson: that money was ephemeral. My mother would say, "The economy could collapse. There could be another world war. You have no idea, but one thing you have is your education. Maybe you will have nothing on your back, but you will have that." And indeed, fifteen years later, my parents sold their business under the duress of massive debt after the global financial crisis. My dad ended the story about the '67 riots in Hong Kong and bombs in North Point, where he grew up. He had turned 18 that year. "I was acting out, and then your grandmother told me that I was adopted. My father is white. He was an American soldier. My mother was a Cantonese woman. I don't know who they are—or much else about them—but I was given to a church, where your grandparents adopted me." The series of stories poured out of him like vomit. I felt like I was hallucinating these visions in that dark room. "Do you have any questions? I will answer them now, but I don't want to talk about this ever again."

"Don't say mourning. *It's too* psychoanalytic.
I'm not mourning. *I'm suffering."*

Roland Barthes*

What's the "end game?" Throughout these months, I encountered this question, posed by journalists to their subjects, by tourists to my friends and I, and it is still rather preposterous that they expected Hong Kong people to predict our own fates. The five, and later six demands, called for clear actions, and yet we were to offer an answer to satisfy a sound bite of what was to come. Countless headlines or op-eds queried whether this would turn out like the Tiananmen Square Massacre. And when a headline asked about the "end," I wondered if in posing the question willed its limits. Does public speculation of the worst, the cunning extents of lawfare, the coercive tactics through misinformation and the machinations between the police and the state, write the strategies for leaders? Many people ask me what is to come for Hong Kong. But who am I, or any of us, to know? There is only one thing that is certain: Hong Kong is a fictive process, and Hong Kong will be a dispersed project.

* Barthes, Roland. *Mourning Diary*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 2010. 92.

Hong Kong is a colony cloaked in the illusory features of a shiny metropole—a host for financial headquarters and luxury real estate. It embodies the oxymoronic status of a "global city" and a former colony. To return once again to the uneasy set of metaphors likening colonialism in corporate language, Hong Kong was only the remote office of the magistrate, and is the historical marker of the end of the colonial period for Great Britain. The territory's decolonization is singular. In 1972, Hong Kong was removed from the UN's list of colonies at the request of the Chinese government and "declared...a purely internal Chinese matter to be resolved when the government decided the time as right."† This territory holds the confluence of many empires between eras. When discussing late capitalism, neoliberalism and neo-colonialism, I think often of the Chinese suffix 注意 (*zhu yi*), which means "ism." Attach it to the end of a word, and each concept, "colonial" for example, takes flight into the abstract. But these systems are lived, and sometimes violently enter the somatic narratives as trauma. Learning these concepts does not approximate the total forms of loss and suffering. Decolonization ultimately asks for the metaphysically impossible: How can you undo time? As a city, Hong Kong is the *living-dead* colony.

† Carroll. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*. 7.

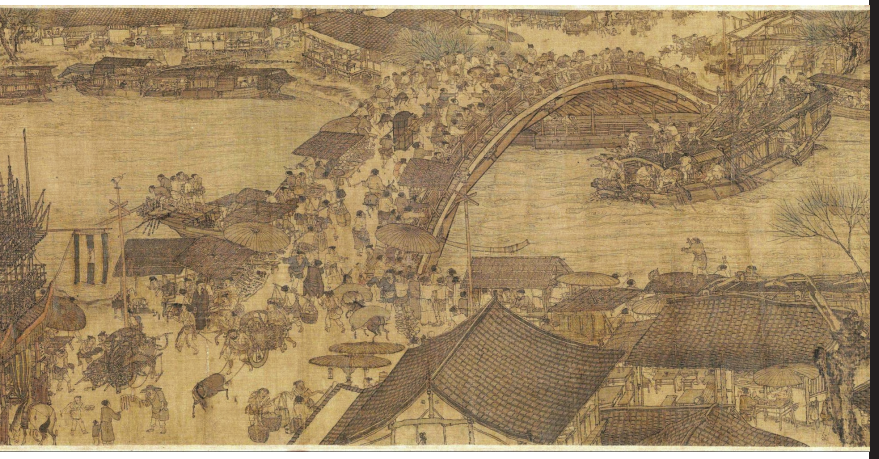
I am already homesick for Hong Kong. Skyline pictures in the news, cyberpunk versions in Hollywood movies and art, simulations in video games, protests memed around the world: these representations only warp my relationship to the city. These images contain no real knowledge of the city, they only reflect its shell. The ubiquitous and mimetic image of Hong Kong only furnishes the tantalizing illusion that the place exists in this nearness; and consuming these images, it is as if this nostalgia will never entirely be my own for a city that exists less and less like the place I know it to be. The feeling of awayness from the city I once knew is already building. While we may be touching its earthliness, do we not already live as exiles, as fugitives, in our own city?

We got drunk and swam at the beach by the power plant. Wading into the water, I found it wasn't as cold as I thought. My friend H[redacted], giggled out there in the darkness, saying "the water looks like black ink." We watched the lights of the power plant glimmering while we floated in the sea.

Along the River During the Qingming Festival (清明上河圖) is a scroll painting from the twelfth century by the Song dynasty painter, Zhang Zeduan. Over five meters long, the scroll occupies a monumental place in Chinese art history and has sparked centuries of copies, reproductions, reinterpretations, elaborations—including the *Harcourt Village Scroll* 夏慤佔領圖, which depicts the occupied area that lasted 75 days during the Umbrella Movement in 2014, and published in 2015 as an unfolding accordion-folded scroll.* Zhang's original depicts life in the capital of Bianjiang on the holiday of Qingming, a day of tomb-sweeping, paying respects, and performing rites to the dead. Zhang reveals the town as an unfurling, continuous image of multitudes—rural and urban scenes from across the classes, with all kinds of varying architecture and roads. The scroll reveals each new subscene as it unfurls, and among them: a ship in danger of crashing into the bridge it is trying to cross under, peddlers at the center of the town, official scholars riding into the town's center, a farmer in the distant outskirts pulling a daisy-chain of oxen along.

The painting's perspective affords a view into the distance. Zhang affords the beholder an omnipotent point of view, but we are used to this perspective now. It is the eye of the drone, of surveillance. When I was volunteering as a [redacted], I knew well the circuits of overpasses that ran from Central to Causeway

* Maoshan Connie 貓珊. *Harcourt Village Scroll*. Harcourt Village Voice, 2015.



A panel from Along the River During the Qingming Festival (清明上河圖)*

* Zhang, Zeduan. *Along the River During Qingming Festival*. 12th century, Palace Museum, Beijing, China.

Bay*—they weave through office buildings, malls, hotels, across tram stops, roadways and perpendicular to the harbor front. I spent so many angsty summers wandering these circuits as a teen, smoking cigarettes and listening to music alone. Intuiting these networks, it was easy for me to outpace the cops and always follow the frontlines from the overpass. And upon these vistas, these scenes came into lucid, distant view. Cinema is a celluloid scroll, and in its quintessential expression a long take that dollies across space, showing a scene's continuous image. Similarly, ancient Chinese scrolls, although continuous, can be parsed into a series of subscenes.

Over Harcourt: Water cannon. Teargas. Projectiles. An assault of less lethal weapons on civilians, and amidst this scene of contemporary civil conflict. This is indeed a hell. And it is the quintessential vision of the Hong Kong protests and the image of conflict that journalists wanted so badly to capture. Journalists lunged across the frontlines with their cameras, capturing the conflicts close-up. But zoomed out, the display surfaced as a diorama in dichotomous choreography of assault and resistance. Gear in a supply line moved to the front. Hand signals communicated for first aid assistance. Dozens of bodies crouched underneath umbrellas, strapping in their helmets and gas masks.

* Frampton, Adam, et al. *Cities Without Ground: A Hong Kong Guidebook*. ORO Editions, 2018.

Simultaneous actions moved in flow, and amidst this, a small body in the crowd was writing in spray paint words onto the pavement of the overpass, moving with others who were covering his body with umbrellas, his movement partially obscured. The spray of the paint underneath his body committed onto concrete the words: [redacted], [redacted]. Each stroke, arms swinging, crawling over the ground with each written character materializing underneath him.

These authorless and prolific acts of graffiti, or writing, occurred alongside direct action. These words would be redacted and painted over only a day later—the city is so cruelly efficient—but the writing in this moment is a practice of occult poetics: it summons the disappeared into the realm of the visible. Zhang's ancient scroll shows the town on the day of Qingming, the day of tomb-sweeping. Alongside the people of the town, bustling, are the invisible souls who live alongside the living. It is a day of heavy traffic of the dead who visit their relatives—some unattended, who are wandering the streets, in eternal restlessness and agony. These souls are invisible on the scroll.

If spirits indeed exist, those of dead dissidents are the indefatigable energies who have haunted our timelines. And who continue to haunt. Liu Xiaobo wrote, "When we think about the victims who harvested nothing, indeed whose 'gains' were only negative numbers, do we feel no personal responsibility, no guilt? Should we not observe minimal standards of human decency and, with that same passion with which we cherish freedom, be sure that the normal resources that derive from the loss of human life—which are the only resources people have in challenging totalitarian power—are properly apportioned?"* And if, indeed, human life is the most potent resource of resistance against authoritarian power, and perhaps the only resource that guards against it in direct action, do we not then summon the dead, our approximate Angels of History? In protest, we observed a collective effort of ancient occult practice. The true "foreign influence" is that of ancient ideas. These restless souls are the spirits who died in vain, and whose eternal state is unrest.

* Liu Xiaobo, et al. "Listen Carefully to The Voices of the Tiananmen Mothers." *No Enemies, No Hatred: Selected Essays and Poems*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. 11-12.

Protestors in Tai Po on August 10th, 2019*

* Galileo Cheng, Twitter post, August 10, 2019, 4:25 p.m., https://twitter.com/galileocheng/status/1160104863415570432

We began on an ambiguous premise.

Epilogue

This is a bastard text. Thread-bound books are typically read from right to left, and printing it this way, as an English text, reverses its standard order. Typically meant for martial-arts scrolls, or even used for printing texts related to feng shui or physiognomy, this inverted self-published form is a challenge to the forms of legitimacy.

This notion of righteousness and validity begins with the underlying question of what is a legitimate protest? Neither this text, nor the point of the struggle it describes, exists to prove the righteousness of the movement to others. Instead it poses a different question, of the lack of humanity premised in asking whether a protest from afar is even legitimate at all. Boaventura de Sousa Santos defines epistemicide as part of the program of violence of the Global North, to negate the knowledge and lived experience of others across the "abyssal line" in the Global South: "The problem is the failure to acknowledge

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本證明書之發給，旨在使本證持有人獲得證明身份之文件以代替護照之用。本證明書對持有人之國籍地位並無妨害，亦無影响。倘持有人另行領得護照時本證明書卽告無效，屆時必須將之繳回發證機關爲要。

the permanence of an abyssal line dividing metropolitan from colonial societies decades after the end of historical colonialism. Such a line divides social reality in such a profound way that whatever lies on the other side of the line remains invisible or utterly irrelevant."* The notion of legitimizing a protest hinges on whether these events can be understood from afar and thus validated by others who do not live them. Accusations about foreign infiltrators and rumors pollute contemporary collective action. It is a device of statecraft, and even in Tiananmen, Liu Xiaobo mentions the accusations of foreign infiltrators who were present then. Defiantly, he said, "It is no wonder that the ordinary people who lived through the butchery might ask: 'When great terror engulfed the city of Beijing, where were all those 'black hands'? "†

Legitimacy is also the question of who gets to speak for a place or write about its history. I am not indigenous to Hong Kong, yet in orbit around this place even after emigrating; I was born here and became naturalized as a citizen elsewhere. My family became entangled with Hong Kong through a series of displacements. Indeed, there is a paradox in asking who is a "local" voice in a place where historically people sought

* Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. Paradigm Publishers, 2014. 70-71.

† Liu Xiaobo, et al. "Listen Carefully to The Voices of the Tiananmen Mothers." *No Enemies, No Hatred: Selected Essays and Poems*. 11.

political refuge, and where most are not indigenous. Who are the legitimate or illegitimate children of a place?

I invoke, in the words of Trinh T. Minh Ha, "speaking nearby" as a strategy: "that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject, " but instead "a speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it."‡ Is my account legitimate if it is written in English? And perhaps, in posing these questions about Hong Kong, this debate is not just related to the city itself, but implicates a broader history of Chinese migration, or 華僑 (*wah kiu*), meaning "diaspora" or "overseas Chinese," a term of even legal consequence about the nature of the Chinese diaspora and its multitudes and rootlessness and resistance against any one dominant culture and its legacy across the centuries. As a person of Chinese diaspora, 華僑 across four generations, who has become entangled with this city: will I always be speaking alongside Hong Kong?

To use the term "bastard" invoked here is a means to embrace the vulgar or the illegitimate, as a central but missing fact of our written histories and of our knowledge of place. This attempts to strike against what forces materials and narratives into the unseeable—forces of shame,

‡ Chen, Nancy N. "Speaking Nearby:" A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh–ha. Visual Anthropology Review, 8, 1992. 82–91.

invalidation and redaction. Resting alongside many other voices, this printed text is an offering to oral histories through their literal and cultural translation. It is summoned as an assemblage of disparate parts onto a continuum.

Self-publishing bought me autonomy and the ability to speak entirely at my own pace, and on my own terms, both culturally and formally. These pages were printed in Hong Kong; the papers touched and approved; the printer chosen by me; the reflective foil is an homage to a frontliner who handed me two pieces of reflective mylar to cover my eyes on my mask. I never used them, but they sat on my coffee table for months, and I thought of that moment almost daily.

Perhaps this text is triggering, especially at the beginning. It will arrive to an audience spread across many places. To my reader I want to bestow just this small fact: Let this text lying in your hands be a companion to you. I felt so much pain writing this alone in the most isolated moments. My therapist asked, "Is there healing in return? If you can think of the one body as one family, perhaps you can think of it as you, the person who is living it now, has decided to return. You have come to heal." You will read this at a time long after its most intense moments have passed. For those who know this place that I describe, both emotional and literal—even if it's not Hong Kong—let this object be a small assurance that you are not alone.

"Whereas the idea of the original home would arouse an agon of bitter ambivalence in me, the redoubled home has no colour or cathexis of pain inseparable from its welcome."

Gillian Rose*

* Rose, Gillian. *Love's Work*. New York Review of Books, 1995. 10.

This year's salty wet (double meaning: "perverse") is about tears

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to all the residents of Speculative Place. I owe the credit of this title, *Too Salty Too Wet,* to Ed Halter who suggested it as a joke, which then became a personal obsession with the excessiveness of the times we live in, and the inevitable disappointment of sequels. Incredible thanks to Sara Frier for the insightful and stellar edits and helping me push this to the finish line.

I owe many thanks for the support, care and intellectual inspiration from the following people during the writing of this text. They have consented to being mentioned.

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更咸更濕

Postscript from Hong Kong

This text is printed and completed as a work of perfect-binding. What you now hold in your hands is a ubiquitous softcover book binding method, whereby pages and the cover are adhered together at the spine with a strong and flexible thermal glue. This form deviates from its original plan as a text to be printed as a thread-bound scroll, invoking the style of scrolls on which martial arts secrets would be printed and distributed.

Thread-bound binding—no longer available in Hong Kong—can only be done at scale across the border. This last-minute change to the method of binding came due to the binder who refused based on its contents, raising concern about the risk of exporting these books, since at customs, every shipment is unpacked and inspected at the risk of being destroyed and censored. There could have been myriad reasons for this refusal, which was a swift decision, including potentially this most preliminary fact, the obscene-sounding title. This text arrives to you not in its originally intended form, but presents the process of printing as an illumination.

Where are the frontlines today? 團結 (*tuen kit*) means solidarity or unity, literally comprising of two words: 團 meaning group and 結 denoting knots. For a leaderless movement, it is impossible to describe its totalities posthumously, and there are many disparate, nuanced and also intensely oppositional parts of this total. But, we are entangled, thread-bound and knotted in relation. The thread that was meant to bind the book together is felt in its absence.

Notes

Notes

Too Salty Too Wet 更咸更濕

Tiffany Sia

Calligraphy by 余在思.

Designed by Fag Tips.

Typeset in Source Serif Variable
and Source Han Sans.

Printed and bound in Hong Kong.

Speculative Place Press,
Hong Kong, 2020

An oral history of tears, geography, and necromancy in and outside of Hong Kong. Too Salty Too Wet 更咸更濕 is a hellish scroll that attempts to catch up to the frontlines of history.

Inspired by thread-bound books of martial arts secrets, this is a bastard text and an assemblage of lyric that confronts news addiction, performs an exercise of breath and optical training, and holds light to occult unrest. How must we summon the invisible?