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Becoming-Animal in Asian Americas: Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *God of Luck* and a Watanabean Triptych (Three Poems by José Watanabe)

MICHELLE HAR KIM

"In which direction . . . are we being freed," Naoki Sakai has asked, if we do not imagine ourselves under the sway of "the myth of [a] monoethnic society"?[1] What is Asian American literature's disavowal of social, cultural, and linguistic homogeneity itself unable to see? These questions help us reconsider the regulative ideas of Anglophonicity and of the United States and North America as archetypical spaces of negotiation for Asian American literatures. With a comparative purview of Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *God of Luck* (2008),[2] a novel written in English about a Chinese coolie's kidnapping and indentured labor in a nineteenth-century Peruvian guano mine, and a "triptych" of three poems in Spanish by the late Peruvian poet José Watanabe (1946–2007), this essay takes literatures of the Asian Americas as a body of immanent incoherence that can de-emphasize and de-objectify the rigidity of identity as often assumed by Asian American literature's English-language and (North) American axioms. As in Mikhail Bakhtin's modern novel and Franco Moretti's *Bildungsroman*,[3] traditional Asian American literature has been based on a quantitative proliferation and insertion of securable voices or points of view, with the narrativizable voice as clear emblem for a seamless community, affording sense to an otherwise chaotic world of writing.

Asian American literature continues to grapple with its strong myth of evenly discrete pluralism, the idea that a singular ethnos trumps discrepant but stable sub-ethnicities that comprise a greater whole. Fidelity to this whole, what we might call "exceptional Asian Americanness," is enhanced by proliferating inclusions of distinct intra-Asian American voices once repressed by more powerful or official narratives, where tropes of sub-ethnic and sub-generic excavation mimic the discreteness of

Asian American voices within multicultural literary arenas. Shared communication and sentiment are ostensibly guaranteed by this myth, as Asian Americanness is understood as an objective experience.[4] Despite increasingly transnational, hemispheric, and global purviews of Asian and Asian American diasporas, an implicit ethos continues to undergird Asian American literature's flexible American basis. It is an ethos of "homolingual address,"[5] the idea that when we communicate, we are in the end "on the same page," and that we figuratively "speak the same language." Homolingual address, then, is not necessarily a single-language articulation about or for a particular community. Rather, it pertains to the assumption of commensurate give and take, of an equivalent import-export of corralled meanings and understandings; that is, of replete communication. Even if we speak or write in radically different languages, we can still address each other homolingually.[6] Though it may be the case, this exposition of McCunn's novel and Watanabe's poetry is not to show that the spaces of *castellano*, Latin America or Peru, have been omitted from the normal scope of Asian American literature. It is rather to suggest that reading for precariousness of community in Asian American writing may be particularly fertile with respect to the Asian Americas and the explicit unwieldiness of its linguistic, historical, and cultural spaces.

Insofar as Asian (US and North) American literature has seen itself as produced by the inaccessibilities of subjecthood or citizenship, we have understood its voices to come to light through a dogged emblematization of the adept or ordinary hero—the exemplary immigrant and/or racialized protagonist's accession to her surrounding social, national, or political spheres. Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *God of Luck* presents a little-known voice for Asian American literature: that of the indentured Asian coolie who works on the guano islands in nineteenth-century Peru. The novel narrates the story of Ah Lung, a young man kidnapped from his Cantonese village and forced on a miserable journey to Macau. During the boat passage across the Pacific with other soon-indentured Chinese laborers, he is swindled into signing a five-year contract to dig guano off the Peruvian coast. An unrivaled natural fertilizer of its time, the hardened bird feces was one of the most prized global exports of the mid-nineteenth century.[7] Ah Lung's wife Bo See and his remaining family are left to compensate for the loss of his manpower at the family silkworm business. As Bo See hatches an intricate plan to boost their downtrodden business and fund a search for her husband at the antipodes of home, Ah Lung sets his mind on an unprecedented escape from the island plantation.

On one of the Chincha Islands known for rich guano reserves, Pedro Chufat, the island's only shopkeeper and non-digger Chinese resident, smugly tells Ah Lung that here "there's no hope of escape for a digger like there is . . . on the mainland."[8] Caught between the desire to take his life and the virtual suicide of an unlikely escape, Ah Lung carefully hatches a plan to elude the attention of guano mine overseers and the other physically exhausted and psychically broken workers. He precariously approaches several *mestizo* boatmen with his painfully broken Spanish.

Ah Lung endears himself to them through an impromptu language of gestures and bodily contact. They mercifully hide him in their empty supply boat on the return trip from *las islas Chincha*, back to Perú's Pisco coast. The boatmen leave him frightened and bewildered in a cave on the mainland. "Vaya con Díos," one repeats to him. Díos? Who is this Díos, Ah Lung wonders as he waits with spells of patience and anxiety. With its vantage from beyond the United States and Canada, Ah Lung's story is new for Anglophone fiction and tells the journey of the coolie to Pacific guano mines during the era of "Chinese bondage in Peru"[9] that followed the begrudging abolition of black slave labor across the globe. As "railroads spurred the development of commercial farming" and scientists discovered guano's incredible fertilizing properties, during the mid-nineteenth century a "series of mad rushes ensued as guano islands were discovered, scraped clean, and abandoned."[10] Mined in few places in the world, the most lucrative guano was on Peru's arid Chincha Islands, where Ah Lung has been shuttled:

> The enormous barking slugs are, I've learned, sea lions. Their droppings and those of birds are called *guano* in Spanish. And so effective is this guano supposed to be as fertilizer that, although there are five-hundred diggers on this island, we can't get ahead of the demand; there are always well over a hundred ships from around the world waiting—most for two or even three months—to be loaded.
>
> At night we have a respite from the head-splitting clamor of the sea lions and birds. But even in sleep, the sharp, pisslike smell of guano pinches my nose, eyes, and throat, and when I begin digging at dawn, a dank, dense mist wraps around my bones. By midmorning, the sun burns off the last trace of mist, the heat grows stifling as the days before a big wind, my chest threatens to burst from lack of air.
>
> The clouds overhead, resembling sheets of pale smoke, are too thin and hang too high in the sky to provide any ease from the sun's arrows, any hint of rain, and I long for them to turn dark and heavy, then shatter in brilliant flashes of lightning and thunderclaps, letting loose a deluge. But no rain falls here. That's why droppings beyond reach of the pounding surf don't wash away, why these gray, treeless hills and steep cliffs are solid guano, the sharp, pisslike smell so pervasive. . . .

> Tightening my grip on the sweat-slick handle of the pickaxe, I swing. As the axe arcs, lightning streaks up my arms and across my shoulders; my heart thrashes against my ribs. Then the axe strikes ground, and my whole body judders. Grit nettles my calves. Chalky powder spirals up, thickening the haze from hundreds of axes hammering the hard-packed guano, shovels tossing crumbling clods through screens, filling baskets and wheelbarrows with the dust, dust that clogs my nostrils, seeps through my lips, coats my tongue, settles in my throat.
>
> My eyes, afire, flood. Snorting and coughing, I swipe at them with the sodden rag around my neck. Nothing clears. I cannot see beyond my hands and feet. But the devils driving us have eyes like hawks, the strength to send us spinning with a kick, to cut us down with their rawhide whips, and although my arms protest, I raise my axe, bring it down.[11]

An integral part of *la trata amarilla* or "yellow trade," as extensively researched by Evelyn Hu-Dehart,[12] approximately 100,000 Chinese coolies were transported over the Pacific between 1849 and 1874 to become laborers on the sugar plantations and guano mines of newly-independent Peru.[13] After Peru's official abolition of slavery in 1854 following the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, Chinese coolies replaced former Afro-Peruvian slaves and "worked alongside a small number of free blacks and Indians from the *sierra* (highland); on some plantations, they constituted the sole labor force."[14] During guano's commodification and exportation, the guano industry used a gamut of "forced Indian labor, followed by [black] slaves, then . . . Chinese coolies' [sic], and [later] Japanese and Polynesian workers."[15] The global scope of the industry between 1849 and 1881 was remarkable, as "countless vessels flying the flags of Great Britain, France, Portugal, Spain and the United States . . . hauled an estimated three-quarters of a million Chinese to Australia, Brazil, Cuba, Hawaii, Peru, Tahiti, and the United States."[16] The islands were a place where

> centuries-old deposits had become hard and compacted, and in many places had to be blasted with gunpowder. . . . Then the stones and sand . . . had to be separated before [they] could be conveyed by ships' launches or to the waiting vessels. . . . the islands are just three rocks, their brown surface cracked by a hot tropical sun whose savage beams are rarely intercepted by a cloud—rocks upon which no rain has fallen for centuries. Here men toiled at work as dangerous as mining, watched over by brutal

> overseers whose task was to ensure that each man fulfilled his daily quota of digging, moving, or loading the foul-smelling material.[17]

God of Luck's realism emerges from this little-known topos that is, to borrow from Kandice Chuh's description of hemispheric studies as "paradigmatically concerned with the relationship of the Americas to the local or national."[18] The characters in McCunn's novel neither arrive at North America nor speak English; with the foregrounding of *castellano*, it is easy to overlook the fact that although the novel is written in English, dialogues and thoughts within the novel occur in Cantonese, and what Ah Lung hears as a rough and foreign tongue—Spanish, compulsory for his hoped-for escape—occasionally percolates through and interrupts the text. Other than the text's historical underpinnings of American magnates and US national policy that sought to profit from this rich overseas resource,[19] neither the United States nor North America appears as a necessary stepping stone, major player, or finale in this Asian American diasporic narrative.

Would the assimilation of Ah Lung as an Asian voice of the Americas prompt us to read *God of Luck* as a previously untold *cimarron* or runaway-slave narrative in Asian American literature—a template of the liberal path towards a no-longer benighted or passive individual consciousness? If so, how can we reckon with *God of Luck*'s crucial interventions, which suggest the heterolingual and multi-axial precedent of New-World Asian Americas—thanks to and despite its rubric of intra-Asian American anticipation of Ishmael-like heroes within a securable and representative plurality? Evelyn Hu-Dehart, Moon-Ho Jung and Lisa Lowe have all suggested that the coolies' relative historical silence is part and parcel of their murky politico-human status and illegibility under the rubric of universalized freedom.[20] Strange migrants at the threshold of slavery's abolition, they are the latest wave of workers upon whom no one can ascertain a clear "status with respect to *freedom* and *enslavement*, polar terms in the dialectic at the center of modern political philosophy."[21] It is undecided, as Moon-Ho Jung conveys, as to whether coolies "represent a relic of slavery or a harbinger of freedom."[22] In *God of Luck* this ambivalence is imperceptible, hidden by an affirmation of the human's formal limits. Where such in-humanity is unamenable to clean representation or formal figuration, how might we seek out other contours of life repressed within a regime that only sees the subject as humanly enfranchised, "almost-subject," or in the throes of imminent politico-economic heroism?

Ah Lung's pursuit of liberty achieves nothing short of refusing the conditions of his possible extermination. Yet, we might ask: Is it possible to avoid reading the coolie as one who attains humanity or becomes human? Can we read his figuration as that which moves against discrete human figuration? Becoming, observes Gilles Deleuze, is a continual and proliferating restlessness rooted neither in individual freedom nor in normative human experience, but in life where the "truth" of origins

is only precariously stable. In this vein, "becoming-human," "becoming-man" and "becoming-Asian American" are contradictory. Acceding to the coherence of Asian America and the Asian American is impossible if writing is worlds apart from the certainty of objective models and the clear human figure.[23] Here we might consider the animal as a catch-all signifier for innumerable kinds of life. Like the French term *l'animot,* which we cannot but hear as the plural *animaux*,[24] "animal" is an artificial clumping of ostensibly non-rational life, the mess of variegated life swept under its rug. In its plural haziness it functions as a precarious limit of the human, "an ambiguous excess upon whose elimination human identity consolidates itself."[25]

Can nineteenth-century indentured Asian labor of the Americas pertain to this informal animal multiplicity that swarms around the narrativizable hero? At the risk of romanticizing life before the Conquistadors, long before nineteenth-century guano would rival twentieth-century petro-dollars,[26] the Inca understood guano's power for agriculture, and decreed that anyone who approached the birds would be put to death.[27] This seeming divestiture of the liberal human stands in stark contrast to the nineteenth-century cemeteries on guano mines that "reportedly overflowed with the rotting corpses of those who failed to survive and . . . [were] buried in graves too shallow to protect remains from scavenging dogs."[28]

Fields across the world, then, were fertilized by human digger bodies in a spiraling cycle of labor, profit, and shit—what the renowned poet César Vallejo neologizes as "calabrina tesórea," or "fecapital ponk," in his 1922 collection *Trilce*. The collection opens with these stanzas:

> Quién hace tanta bulla, y ni deja
> testar las islas que van quedando.
>
> Un poco más de consideración
> en cuanto será tarde, temprano
> y se aquilatará mejor
> el guano, la simple calabrina tesórea
> que brinda sin querer,
> en el insular corazón,
> salobre alcatraz, a cada hialóidea
> grupada.
>
> Who's making all that racket, and not even letting
> the islands that linger make a will.
>
> A little more consideration
> as it will be late, early,
> and easier to assay
> the guano, the simple fecapital ponk

a brackish gannet
toasts unintentionally,
in the insular heart, to each hyaloid
squall.[29]

Written in 1922, well after the guano golden era, there are no Chinese laborers visible here. Vallejo sketches no human presence, only hints of stinky, capital-generating feces in his peculiar, rigorous, and frustrating syntax that "does not . . . simply seek out the referent" or offer any testimonial role to Latin American or any other writing.[30] Like an animal, this poem "does not speak 'like' a man but pulls from the language tonalities . . . to open the word unto unexpected internal intensities."[31] There is no compliance here with any sanction of verisimilitude—a sanction that has heavily informed Asian American writing, and is part and parcel of "the burden of authenticity" that Kandice Chuh claims to doggedly imbue "Asian American literatures [with] some immanent, 'real' meaning."[32]

The anthropomorphism of the islands in this poem—their will and desire despite our lack of care—are hauntings of in-humanity, of the abuses of labor and natural resources, and of the incoherent and absent "voice" of the coolie. Eduardo Cadava likewise reads Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Fate" as a text that haunts the United States with death and dispossession: "[T]he German and Irish millions, like the Negro," says Emerson in 1860, "have a great deal of guano in their destiny. They are ferried over the Atlantic, to ditch and to drudge, to make corn cheap, and then to lie down prematurely to make a spot of green grass on the prairie."[33] We witness the becoming-animal of Emerson's writing, the haunting of subjectivity from beyond the bounds of the formal human story.

Where the compelling heroism of *God of Luck* allows for a clear narration of an Asian American figure, the following trio of poems may be seen as a triptych—not in the classical sense where two outer panels are subordinated to a central figure, but in the same vein as the unsettling triptychs that recur throughout the oeuvre of Irish painter Francis Bacon (1909–1992).[34] In his book on Bacon, Gilles Deleuze describes Bacon's triptychs as resembling "movements or parts of a piece of music" that harbor "a circular organization . . . rather than a linear one,"[35] with meaty and animal-like "protagonists" that frustrate the potential of clean figurative narration on behalf of any extended multitude.

A revered Peruvian writer best known for his poetry, Watanabe's ethnic hybridity from the start frays the notion of stable ethnic categorization that, one could argue, has been a premiere point of authorial authorization for Asian American literatures generally. His father migrated from Japan to Peru in 1916, and later met his mother, a *mestiza* Peruvian woman, on the Laredo sugar hacienda in the province of Trujillo, in Peru's northern region of La Libertad.[36] Both parents were sugarcane workers. Despite popular familiarity with Watanabe's ethnic *mestizo* background—*mestizo* not in the traditional sense of being of mixed native, Spanish and/or African

descent, but as a Japanese Peruvian[37]—the poet has often been assumed as one whose style is predominantly influenced by a static Japanese literature and culture. His wife, the poet Michaela Camino Chirif, recalls that Watanabe was once asked if he could speak and write Japanese in a television interview. With gravity he said something akin to: "I did once, long ago, but I remember so little of it now."[38] Watanabe indeed neither spoke nor wrote Japanese, and his resolution to this public question, which he would later recall with laughter, gives us an example of the expectations of Japaneseness that he would navigate.

Qualifying Watanabe's work as Asian American literature involves various figurations or allegories regarding the poet's ethnic and cultural difference with respect to mainstream Peruvian society; themes about his father's immigration to and assimilation in Peru as an *issei* migrant; narratives about work in the cane fields; and perhaps José's autoethnographic or autobiographical experiences growing up Japanese Peruvian in the rural town of Laredo. Such emblematic narratives of success or tragedy, however, do not assume center stage. In Watanabe's poetry, the (extra)ordinary individual that emblematizes the whole is not so easily thematized. A palpable motif in his lean, haunting verse occurs through serial and captivating encounters neither with humans nor with society as we know it, but with animals, in an ongoing motif of anthropocentric short-circuiting, which represents a distillation of the priority of human life. Watanabe's conjurings of dogs, fish, stones, and other forms of life animate and inanimate refrain from deploying the animal as a discrete metaphor with an uncertain ability to speak as part or for a coherent community.

Humans and animals alike appear at the edge of Watanabe's world interrupted in figuration, unconcerned with serving as holistic metaphors of individual emancipation. It is through the animal that Watanabe would have read against *humanitas*, "against" the human subject, as the one point through which we can understand and know ourselves.[39] The figuring of rats, gulls, and frogs, on one hand, and of "animal" as imprecise multiplicity on the other, helps us reckon with the divergent contributions of *God of Luck*'s rugged protagonist and Watanabe's theme of escape from anthropocentrism's radar; that is, the idea of man as center and "central fact of the universe, to which all surrounding facts have reference."[40] Without corroborating an anthropocentrism once taken for granted both in painting and in the realist novel, Watanabe, like Bacon, blurs the obvious "delineat[ion] . . . of man's architectural or natural environment around the human figure, the setting in which he was the measure."[41]

Although its narrative is sparked with birds that create a line of flight from the *zafra* (the burning of the sugarcane fields after their harvest), Watanabe's "El guardián del hielo," or "The Ice Guardian," does not protagonize an animal, nor does it paint in abstractions devoid of recognizable living beings. Disguised as amenable to allegory, this poem exhibits a curious metamorphosis, a subtle pull toward strangeness and "lo efímero"—a becoming-animal that initiates a shift into that or

those things which one will never utterly become. We are left with, perhaps, a self-knowledge that oddly curbs humanism as human exceptionalism.

El guardián del hielo

Y coincidimos en el terral
el heladero con su carretilla averiada
y yo
que corría tras los pájaros huidos del fuego
de la zafra.
También coincidió el sol.
En esa situación, cómo negarse a un favor llano:
el heladero me pidió cuidar su efímero hielo.

Oh cuidar lo fugaz bajo el sol . . .

El hielo empezó a derretirse
bajo mi sombra, tan desesperada
como inútil.

Diluyéndose
dibujaba seres esbeltos y primordiales
que solo un instante tenían firmeza
de cristal de cuarzo
y enseguida eran formas puras
como de montaña o planeta
que se devasta.

No se puede amar lo que tan rápido fuga.
Ama rápido, me dijo el sol.
Y así aprendí, en su ardiente y perverso reino,
a cumplir con la vida:
yo soy el guardián del hielo.[42]

The Ice Guardian

So we came across each other in the breeze
the ice vendor with his broken cart
and I
who would chase birds escaping
the burning of the cane.
The sun too had found us.
At that moment, who could deny the merest favor:

the vendor asked me to watch his ephemeral wares.

Oh to care for evanescence under the sun . . .

The ice began to trickle
under my shadow—as useless
as it was desperate.

Its dissolution
traced svelte and primordial beings
with the fleeting density
of quartz crystal
and suddenly they were pure forms
as of mountains or a planet
abruptly ravaged.

How impossible to love what so quickly fades.
Love swiftly, said the sun.
And I learned, in her perverse and ardent kingdom,
to honor life:
I am the guardian of ice.

In this poem, as in much of Watanabe's work, consciousness and passion neither originate, nor can be contained within, discrete human boundaries. This turn from the human as central reference point is exploited by the peculiar ability of literature that, like Bacon's paint, "desubjectify consciousness and passion"[43] by stripping out easy figuration. It would seem that there is a clear metaphor here, an easy equivalence between precarious human life and melting ice. An ostensibly bounded substance or experience, thingly and icy "life" oscillates between semi-rigid form and opaque semblances. Guardianship of the melting wares fails radically, as the places of the narrator and the worlding he unwittingly witnesses blend into each other in hazy and imprecise description. A splitting narrator (who simultaneously manages past and present modes), a sunny potentate, the vendor, and evanescence itself, all swim between subject and object. Unwilling to bear the depth of extended allegory, Watanabe's poem appears to emulate Bacon's "solitary wrestling in a *shallow depth* that rips the painting away from all narrative but also from all symbolization."[44]

Human or not, "depth" of life is not what is at stake in "The Ice Guardian," even if our desire is piqued for a palpable accumulation of experience that would enable the narrator to overcome his anxious failure to capture, or salvage, the vague primordial things, amorphous quartz, and disappearing planets—all objects whose formality eludes us. Absence of formal communication also occludes the sensation of depth and allegory, as the only specter of community that remains is the trust of the absent and anonymous ice vendor. We are left with a flatness of individual

experience, a strange ambivalence and unguarded complacency regarding the deficiency of communication or language that would adequately translate the ice's transmissions, its uncanny omnipresence or extratemporality. Happenstance encounters of vendor, narrator, and sun contort the figural power of the rational man and his ice-object; they elicit the desire to "know" more of, and to be a part of, this fading diorama that betrays no human correspondence. As Bacon's figures often do, the narrator and his objects here bleed into each other, and all over the place—a response to Deleuze and Guattari's question in *Thousand Plateaus*: "What if one became animal or plant through literature"?[45]

Ratas y gaviotas

En el promontorio, a media altura,
donde no llega el romper de las olas,
hay una gruta honda como nave de catedral.
Por las delgadas cornisas que dan al mar
algunas ratas equilibrian y alcanzan la cueva
después de saciarse con los despojos de las mareas.
Y por el aire entran las gaviotas que anidan
en las altas salientes. Sólo sus alas blanquean
en la oscuridad que desciende hasta el piso
donde brillan, supongo, los ojillos rojos de las ratas.
Es difícil ver la cueva. Al frente sólo está el mar abierto.
Los pescadores que hoy me llevan a puerto San Andrés
navegan frente a este aislado promontorio arrullados
por el motor de sus pequeños botes. Los pensamientos
parecen haber cesado: las ratas y las gaviotas
no son viejas alegorías. Todos
hemos entrado en una rara inocencia.
El mar también se ha despojado de sus historias
y nos lleva con la pura física de navegación.[46]

Rats and Seagulls

Within the promontory, halfway up
past the break of the waves
is a cavern, deep like a cathedral's nave.
Along its delicate cornices that overlook the ocean
several rats balance themselves and reach the cave
after sating themselves with the spoils of the sea.
And through the air enter seagulls that come to nest
in the higher outcroppings. Only wings flash

in a darkness that descends to the ground
where, I imagine, the rats' red eyeballs glimmer.
It is hard to see the cave. Its entrance is only open sea.
Today the fishermen who take me to the port of San Andrés
navigate the face of this isolated promontory lulled
by the motor of its little boats. All thoughts
seem to have ceased: rats and gulls
are not old allegories. We all
have entered into a strange innocence.
The ocean too has stripped itself of stories
and carries us with pure physics of navigation.

Is Watanabe's "Ratas y gaviotas" a haunted photograph, unable to repress histories of indentureship? As in *Trilce*, there are no coolies here, yet we sense a nearly absent narrator who loses himself in, or shares himself with, the nearby animals, the ocean, and the cliff.[47] We witness the failure of Romantic bliss, a strange in-the-zone human abstraction in gazing up at the promontory (where Emerson would have liked to perch). It is difficult to disavow this scene's layered historical hauntings. One would again compare Watanabe's poetry to Bacon's half-human and half-meat figures. Where representation is putatively given and abstracted from the conditions of its existence—like the ostensibly representative body of "Asian Americans"—both Bacon and Watanabe "converg[e] on a similar problem: both renounce the domain of representation and instead [take] the *conditions* of representation as their object."[48] The poem, like Vallejo's, is haunted with mid-nineteenth-century diggers in a way that betrays anthropocentrism's scrambling with anthropomorphism—as we tap the energy of in-humanity that renders the elision of racialized human traffic palpable through literature—that is, as literally conspicuous.

El nieto

Una rana
emergió del pecho desnudo y recién muerto
de mi abuelo, Don Calixto Varas.
Libre de ataduras de venas y arterias, huyó
roja y húmeda de sangre
hasta desaparecer en un estanque de regadío.
La vieron
con los ojos, con la boca, con las orejas
y así quedó para siempre
en la palabra convencida, y junto
a otra palabra, de igual poder
para conjurarla.

Así la noche transcurría eternamente en equilibrio
porque en Laredo
el mundo se organizaba como es debido:
en la honda boca de los mayores.

Ahora, cuando la verdad de la ciencia que me hurga
es insoportable,
yo, descompuesto y rabioso, pido a los doctores
que me crean que la gente no muere de un órgano enfermo
sino de un órgano que inicia una secreta metamorfosis
hasta ser animal maduro y dispuesto a abandonarnos.
Me inyectan.
En mi somnolencia siento aterrado
que mi corazón
hace su sístole y su diástole en papada de rana.[49]

The Grandson

A frog
emerged from the bare and newly-dead chest
of my grandfather, Don Calixto Varas.
Freed from a mesh of veins and arteries, it fled
slick and red with blood
until it disappeared in an irrigation ditch.
They saw it
with their eyes, mouths, and ears
and remained this way always
in the cogent word, beside
other words of equal power
to conjure it.
That night continued in eternal balance
for in Laredo
the world was organized like it should be:
by the profound lips of elders.

Now, when the scrutinizing certainty of science
is insufferable,
I, furiously decomposing, insist the doctors
believe me, we cannot die of a failing organ
unless it sparks a secret metamorphosis
until it matures into an animal ready to abandon us.
They inject me.
In my drowsiness I am terrified

that my heart
beats systole and diastole in the chin of a frog.

Animals and becoming-animal in Watanabe's poetry—along with the emergent "animals" of narrator and speaker—neither serve as easy metaphors nor conjecture about human experience. They gesture toward a dissolution of such humanist grounds.

In "El nieto," the appearance of the grandfather-as-frog muddles in-human boundaries and baffles all reasonable explanation. Yet it is not this alone that draws us into its becoming-animal. Rather, it is the human axis that has no secure place here, because the poem maps "against every convention of mapping, a terrain open to animal being."[50] Watanabe generates questions about the constitution and the quest for narrativizable voice. "Minorities," implore Deleuze and Guattari, as if peering into melting ice, "must also be thought of as seeds, crystals of becoming whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and deterritorializations of the mean or majority."[51] In a demotion, spreading, and sharing of the formal man for whom the other-than-human world would appear as objects devoid or incapable of *humanitas*, Watanabe provides Asian American literature with a species of "strategic anti-essentialism"—Kandice Chuh's rendering of (George Lipsitz's variation upon) Spivak: a sense of essentialism's point of view or contingent potentiality that moves beyond Asian American literature's "subject-driven primacy."[52]

Notes

The original Watanabe poems above can be found in José Watanabe, *Poesía Completa* (Madrid: Pre-Textos, 2008); the English translations have appeared in "José Watanabe," trans. Michelle Har Kim, *Asian American Literary Review* 2.1 (2011): 55-85.

[1] On the myth of Japan as a monoethnic society see Naoki Sakai, "Nationality and the Politics of the 'Mother Tongue.'" *Deconstructing Nationality*, ed. Naoki Sakai (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 1.

[2] Ruthanne Lum McCunn, *God of Luck* (New York: Soho Press, 2008).

[3] Franco Moretti and Albert Sbragia, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture, New Edition* (New York: Verso, 2000); M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982).

[4] On the myth of the Japanese people as one ethnic community, see Sakai, "Nationality and the Politics of the 'Mother Tongue,'" 2.

[5] For a discussion of homolingual address see Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[6] Ibid., 4.

[7] See J.B. Foster and B. Clark, "Ecological Imperialism: The Curse of Capitalism." *Socialist Register* (2003): 186–201.

[8] McCunn, *God of Luck*, 189.

[9] Watt Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru: A History of the Chinese Coolie in Peru, 1849-1874* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1951).

[10] Fredric D. Schwarz, "Does Guano Drive History?," *American Heritage* 2004, http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/it/2004/4/2004_4_63.shtml.

[11] McCunn, *God of Luck*, 163-165.

[12] See for example, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Latin America in Asia-Pacific Perspective." *What is in a Rim?: Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*, ed. Arif Dirlik (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Opium and Social Control: Coolies on the Plantations of Peru and Cuba." *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1.2 (2005): 169-183; Ibid.

[13] Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Coolies, Shopkeepers, and Pioneers: The Chinese of Mexico and Peru, 1849–1930." Amerasia 15.2 (1989): 92.

[14] Hu-DeHart, "Opium and Social Control," 170; "Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba and Peru in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labor or Neoslavery?" *Haiwai huaren yanjiu* (*Journal of Overseas Chinese Studies*), the Society of Overseas Chinese Studies, Taipei, 2 (1992): 149–181.

[15] David Hollett, *More Precious than Gold: The Story of the Peruvian Guano Trade* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), 25.

[16] Jimmy M. Skaggs, *The Great Guano Rush: Entrepreneurs and American Overseas Expansion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), 162; Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru*, 162.

[17] Hollett, *More Precious than Gold*, 118.

[18] Kandice Chuh, "Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres: Navigating Karen Tei Yamashita's Literary World." *American Literary History* 18.3 (2006): 619.

[19] "US CODE: Title 48,1411. Guano districts; claim by United States," http://assembler.law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode48/usc_sec_48_00001411----000-.html. The US Guano Act of 1856 vested US citizens with the power to take possession of any unclaimed guano "island, rock, or key" as territory "appertaining to the United States" (US Code).

[20] Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labor of Neoslavery," *Contributions in Black Studies* 12, Article 5; Lisa Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents." *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 568; Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

[21] Lowe, "Haunted by Empire," 204.

[22] Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 4.

[23] See, for example, Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*; *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); C. Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

[24] Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, trans. Marie-Louise. Mallet, *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

[25] Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 9.

[26] Hollett, *More Precious than Gold*, 18.

[27] Ibid., 32.

[28] Skaggs, *The Great Guano Rush*, 61.

[29] César Vallejo, *The Complete Poetry: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Clayton Eshelman (University of California Press, 2007), 166-167.

[30] Michelle Clayton, "Trilce's Lyric Matters." *Revista de estudios hispánicos* 42.1 (2008): 88.

[31] Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 22.

[32] Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

[33] Eduardo Cadava, "The Guano of History." *Cities Without Citizens*, eds. Aaron Levy and Eduardo Cadava (Philadelphia, PA: Slought Foundation, 2004), 137-166; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate." *The Conduct of Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1904), 3-49.

[34] See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon, Logique De La Sensation*, vol. 2 (Paris: Éditions de la Différince, 1981).

[35] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 60.

[36] Randy Muth, *José Watanabe: El ojo que nos descubre: La poesía de un nikkei peruano* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009), 21.

[37] José Watanabe, "Elogio del refrenamiento." *Elogio del refrenamiento: antología poética, 1971-2003* (Sevilla, Spain: Renacimiento, 2003), 143-150.

[38] Michaela Camino Chirif, "Personal Interview with Michaela Camino Chirif." Interview by Michelle Har Kim, June 2008.

[39] See Nishitani Osamu, "Anthropos and Humanitas: Two Western Concepts of 'Human Being.'" *Deconstructing Nationality*, eds. Naoki Sakai, Brett de Bary, and Iyotani Toshio, vol. 4 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 259-273.

[40] "anthropocentric." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 1989.

[41] Luigi Ficacci, *Francis Bacon 1909-1992* (Los Angeles, CA: Taschen Basic Art, 2003), 12.

[42] José Watanabe, *Cosas del cuerpo* (Lima, Perú: Caballo Rojo, 1999).

[43] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 134.

[44] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, xv, Deleuze's emphasis.

[45] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4.

[46] José Watanabe, *Banderas detrás de la niebla* (Lima, Peru: PEISA, 2006).

[47] San Andres, as mentioned in the poem, lies off the Pisco coast. This is where Ah Lung fled after escaping the guano mines.

[48] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, xiii-xiv. His emphasis.

[49] José Watanabe, *El huso de la palabra* (Lima, Peru: Editorial Colmillo Blanco, 1989).

[50] Lippit, *Electric Animal*, 128.

[51] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 106.

[52] Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 10, 29.