

plots. But the airtight stringency of *Lightning Rods*' narration, its refusal of the knowing wink, and its singular fidelity to the discourse that has forged its every element leaves little room for an alternate system of values to signal its presence, even if only by implication. Is it a satire of corporate culture? Male sexuality? Political correctness? It doesn't diminish the novel's power of ridicule over these targets to press the question further; the book itself insistently does so, teasing the reader that Joe's last name could after all be Schmoie, and that the action itself might be nothing more than an extended masturbation fantasy (a version of the "it was only a dream" ending prohibited in every beginning creative writing course). With the citation of Mel Brooks's *The Producers* in the book's Acknowledgments, one comes to suspect that the book might itself represent a kind of hoax along the lines of "Springtime for Hitler," that *Lightning Rods* may just be a 273-page long con. We are challenged to regard it with the same incredulity that some within the story regard Joe's invention: are you serious?

In *The Producers*, "Springtime for Hitler" was less a satire of Broadway than the instrument by which Broadway satirized itself. The same may be said of *Lightning Rods*. If it is a satire "of" anything, it is of the predominant literary novel of our time and its assemblage of hackneyed conventions meant to give us the "uniquely human." In the unsparring light of *Lightning Rods*, the contemporary novel of psychological realism stands revealed as a patchwork of readymade materials—clichés and slogans, the hoariest sententia and newly-minted banalities made "original" by the unspoken complicity of all parties involved to find each particular identikit combination worthy of suitably breathless blurbs. DeWitt's "bad" book makes a joke of all the agents and editors, marketing and publicity departments, booksellers and book reviewers, and readers who take genuinely mediocre works for good coin. Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* is no less a howling absurdity than *Lightning Rods*; the difference is that one of them knows itself as such.

Edmond Caldwell

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Cathy Park Hong, *Dance Dance Revolution*. New York: Norton, 2007. 120pp. \$23.95

Cathy Park Hong, *Engine Empire*. New York: Norton, 2012. 93pp. \$24.95

"We offal de finest sampla," announces the "guide" of Cathy Park Hong's *Dance Dance Revolution* as the sequence of poems nears its end. The book,

for its variety of sound play, might itself be considered a “sampla,” a platter of linguistic delicacies in the forms of puns, malapropisms, and phonetically spelled words. Hong’s new collection *Engine Empire* adds yet more variety to the spread. It continues the earlier book’s social commentary in a progression of ballads, prose poems, sonnet variations, and less familiar forms. Both books create hybrids of narrative genres, including travelogue, fantasy, and memoir. *Dance Dance Revolution* guides us from Korea to Sierra Leone to Connecticut to the “Desert”; *Engine Empire* pulls us westward towards California-as-frontier and then to urban China and into the future. The science that shapes each of the situations is fictional: the Desert condenses the world’s major cities into hotels; the future has a climate of “smart snow.” As allegories of cosmopolitan life, these tropes caution against overvaluing the mere appearance of cultural variety. Hong’s wide range, then, is the subject of her critique as well as a source of her poetry’s pleasure.

Hong’s invented dialect reveals the difficulty of defining selfhood apart from one’s personal history or the cultural variety that overwhelms it. The main characters of *Dance Dance Revolution* embody this dilemma. The Korean tour guide and the historian who interviews her, our Desert liaisons, both narrate their past experiences amid recent international conflicts, the Kwangju uprising in South Korea and the civil war in Sierra Leone. The present setting is the fantastical Desert, a small-scale caricature of the world. Like the Borges map that suffers human neglect and the effects of weather, the Desert continues the conflicts of the world it would put on show. But unlike Borges’s map, the Desert is not built on a one-to-one scale. Its appeal and its ghastliness come from its acute contraction of cultures and histories and languages. The book’s foreword, written in the voice of the historian, explains that the Desert is a “city whose decree is *there is difference only in degree*. This city is the center of elsewhere but perhaps that is not accurate. As the world shrinks, elsewhere begins to disappear.” Hong’s Desert is an alternative to flat models of globalization: it preserves features of culture as well as inequalities of power while gathering them in one place. The first part of the decree, “there is difference,” proves as important as the second, “only in degree.” Cities “elsewhere” might be present superficially in the physical structures of cities-made-hotels, but they are profoundly so in the figures of residents who bring their stories with them. Hong’s optimism lives in language’s promise to accumulate and transform—to enrich—as it encounters its neighbors.

Both the richness and the risk of miniaturizing become evident in the language of the Desert, a range of pidgins that vary by accidents of region, but also by time: “Civilian accents morph so quickly that their accents betray who they talked to that day rather than their cultural roots,” the historian

explains. The characters most often speak and write about their families and childhoods. But the guide describes herself in language that draws on other people's speech (and other poets' language) and introduces to her biography a range of influences far beyond her own experiences. The guide is a linguistic performer, playing what she calls the "mouthpiece role":

...Opal o opus,
behole, neon hibiscus bloom beacons!
"Tan Lotion Tanya" billboard...she
your lucent Virgil, den I's taka ova
as talky Virgil...want some tea? Some pelehoo?

Mine vocation your vacation!

In this first, eager sales pitch, the guide's verbal range reaches so far that it risks consuming her: "o"s and "b"s and "v"s stack up, bathetic punning ("behole!") gives way to literary allusion (the poster girl for tanning lotion becomes the religious epic guide). One wonders how deliberate this narrator, as distinct from Hong, is in her speech, how much she understands of what she says. The Desert's pidgins preserve verbal distinctiveness—and even trademark it, we learn—while detaching it from its origins, and detaching its speakers from theirs.

The majority of the book's poems are spoken by the guide, and Hong writes them nearly all in this pidgin. Needless to say, reading the book is taxing; the dialect can be difficult and requires some acclimation. (The historian's foreword provides help, with examples and translations.) The answers are in the ear: the guide's words sound more than they look like contemporary English, requiring that we hear her voice—pronouncing words in our minds as she would—in order to make sense of the poems. In one passage, she describes her mother's "epic song lasting / twotreefo day... sponge up de Han...ssulp'un yaegge." I follow the first three words, find the numbers that make up the fourth, then wonder what I am missing after each set of ellipses. The obscurity of many of the cultural references can also be daunting. Here, the guide describes her epileptic friend and lover Sah:

y took mine paw to 'im heart
...alis, alas!

... When we turn Socialist, 'e hab visionaires
o woodcut serfs rising up, torch to torch,
'e say dis will happen in our nation...I say to im,
'his visionare wear falsies, no serfs
en Korea...

The force of this passage comes from doubting Sah's visions by accusing him of padding a bra: "I say to im, / 'his visionare wear falsies." But what is "alis"? And "visionaires" seems to be a degenerate form of the French term for "visionary"—but how specific is the reference? Does it point to the concept, or the fashion magazine by that title? The French might contribute to the passage's meaning, implying, against the guide's doubt, that an oblique kind of knowledge is at work in what Sah reports. Or it might merely add another extraneous foreign reference, showing how language, increasingly, exceeds its speakers. There is pleasure in recognizing such allusions and in deciphering some of the more difficult passages by reading them aloud. But Hong's style, and the aims of such cleverness, can seem elusive.

Where we feel unsatisfied or confused by Hong's portrayal of the guide, the poems do their most important work, moving us past our cultural condescension to perceive a self-possessed, human character. The historian, who writes in standard English in her brief recaps at the end of each chapter, recalls the seminal childhood experience of discovering one's own consciousness, and disbelieving that others could possibly have such a "secret" of their own. A similar kind of recognition governs our attitude toward the guide. As we learn to hear her voice, we come to trust in her intelligence and sympathize with her experiences—without forgetting that the distinctiveness making us believe in this character also keeps her remote from us.

The guide's voice—for all it teaches us—fails the guide herself. Her life story follows a familiar, even clichéd, narrative of political idealism thwarted. She sought to resist the conformity of her grandfather and father—both "yes-men" to Japanese colonists and then Korean capitalists, respectively—by joining the Kwangju student movement. In Korea, she rallied protesters over the radio, a detail that links her intimately to the historian, we learn: she is the lost love of the historian's father. Her speech and her story remain less liberated or rousing than overtaken—a sometimes lyrical, sometimes crude amalgam of her influences. By the end of the book, she despairs at the inability to make language wholly her own: "...I's unpeel mine insides fo one clean note / tru all de marshy crowd sounds, tru all de trademark / cowed libel." But pronouncing "through" as "tru[e]," we can hear a significant ambiguity: she implies that the Desert's language holds some authority. The "trademark / cowed libel" comes to be authentic, though it misguides her: she admits she is informing on Desert revolutionaries to the local authorities. Her fight, it seems, has led her right back to her "yes-men" roots. She can only accept the backward-looking satisfaction the historian gives her: the chance to reconnect to her memory of Sah through his daughter.

Linguistic confusion thwarts the guide from setting her own resistant course. But nearby in the Desert it does the very opposite, providing means

for social agitation. Consider the book's title: in the narrative, it refers to the Desert's own social revolution, which mirrors the Kwangju student revolt. Though Hong seizes on the word "revolution," she takes the dancing just as seriously. Sections of the book that describe the border region between the Desert and New Town, where the revolutionaries were exiled, show one dance scene after another, each one a different cultural ritual. These border region dances do not merely repeat the failed strategies of the uprising. They are active steps toward building a changed community; dance becomes a new form of protest. The second poem in the "Music of the Street Series," a word game called "The Hula Hooper's Taunt," shows a dance that claims belonging:

I'mma two-ton spiker hips fast rondeau
n'ere more nay sayer feel this orbit rattle

Wipe that prattle that spittle crass pupa
gupta away you ma' man,

where you revolving solving
spin shorty shark satellitic fever

leer not, lyre I spiral atom pattern
faster than you say my turn.

The hula-hooper's assertion of skill is an assertion of identity. The motions are aggressive ("two-ton spiker"), elegant (the "rondeau" step), and elemental (the hula hoop pattern recalls the atom). They are also positive: in direct contrast to the guide's aim not to be a "yes-man," this hula hooper vows not to be a "nay sayer." The guide's last words in the book confirm this confident tone with another dance motif: "If de world is our disco ball, / might I have dim dance." Again, the miniaturized form of the world serves to entertain, and "dim" as adjective tempers the hopefulness of the book's conclusion. But "dim" serves also as a pronoun, and this disco offers democratic possibility. To have "them" dance—not to the instructions of the video game but as the guide would lead her fellow residents, according to their own bodies and styles—might make this fantasy world, and its ways of redefining its society, less resemble our own.

Hong's Desert exists within a generation of our early twenty-first century. The discrete sections of *Engine Empire* reach further back, to the American West of the frontier era, and also further forward, to a future shaped by

consciousness-carrying “snow.” The middle section invents a near present in the city of Shangdu, a fictionalized Shenzhen, China. Along with the Desert, these scenes create a constellation of social allegories, and much of their interest lies in the lines that connect them. In the leaps between the nineteenth-century frontier, present-day China, and the technologized world of the future, our received notions of selfhood persist only to confront unimagined dangers.

In the first section, Hong uses linguistic difference to remind us that her Wild West is a remote realm, however familiar it may have come to seem from countless pop culture representations. The period vocabulary she uses is far less demanding than the guide’s patois in *Dance*, but it is equally rich. Hong shapes a noun-thick, heavily stressed diction—of “colt towns,” “blood strops,” “scullground” plains—into poems that come to be as much about language as about frontier brutality. The section is a sequence of ballads and includes lipograms, songs, and an abecedary. This formal play confronts lawlessness and violence with the constraint—and creativity—of rule. As a form that turns scarcity into resonance, the lipogram does special work here. Hong’s use of the form—in “Ballad in O,” “Ballad in A,” and “Ballad in I”—limits a single poem to a single vowel and proceeds from the “O” of emptiness to the “I” of the self. The first ends with some advice:

So don’t confront hotbloods,
don’t show off, go to blows or rows,
don’t sob for gold lost to trollops,
don’t drown sorrows on shots of grog.

Work morn to moon.
Know how to comb bottom pools,
spot dots of gold to spoon bolts of gold.
Vow to do good.

This pitch for industriousness and against social entanglements would seem futile in the frontier West Hong portrays. Ending on a truism suggests that the poem’s message resides in how it sounds, not what it knows. The poem delivers its argument against violence through poetic styling. As a creative force, that styling is urgent, because the violence of these scenes works on the minds as well as the bodies of their human population. When the lipogram’s final quatrain turns to positive advice, the verbs affirm thought, combining physical action, “work,” with internal action, “know” and “vow.”

More disorienting than the poems’ vocabulary is their voice, the “we” of the band that speaks most of these ballads. This voice, like that of a Cormac

McCarthy narrator, remains unsettlingly steady as it reports cruel act after cruel act. But where McCarthy's work erases grounds for judgment, Hong offers a source for judgment in language usage, both historical and contemporary. In the band's account of one member's fate, she plays on the frequent confusion of "consciousness" and "conscience," making the adjectival version of the former into a noun: "Our brother drowns of conscious," the "we" says. It's not just morality that's a liability in this West: an individual mind cannot survive. What can survive is collective presence, a mode of existence that dismisses distinctiveness and even outsources action.

The protagonist of the sequence, the "adapted boy" Jim, stands in contrast to the anonymous others. He remains separate in action, as the band's designated and highly effective killer, and also in voice, as a singer whose songs we hear about but rarely hear. That separateness gets tested over the course of the sequence. In one early scene, Jim is charged with demonic possession; a preacher makes his body shake to prove he has been overtaken, and the band narrates, "Our Jim cries from such an invasion. / :No one never in me. No one." Here, Hong gives the boy a line of dialogue, and though it is reported rather than heard, it confirms that his voice remains his own. But gradually, the collective voice claims, his mind turns vacant and he kills even too readily for the band he serves: "Our Jim's gone husk," and then, "Our Jim's gone deadmouthed, won't respond / to our bit, his head's a petrified den tree— / and some ursine beast from tarnation / is holed up inside it."

The climax of the sequence, containing some of the book's most memorable poetry, comes at the moment the band turns against him. Their plan, to attack him in his sleep, is thwarted by Jim's voice, the very quality that proved his integrity from the start:

But he sang in his dreams, so raw
he sucked us inside his fevered innards:
a cloudburst of a horse rising to a stolen remuda
as if all Mexico was raided: stallions, peg ponies, hogbacks—
Git out he cried yet we were boiled
inside him where

we saw a cross-dressing squaw in chaps,
charging that mutant, mural herd through Bodietown,
trampling down our tallowed kip tents, knocking
down engine cars packed with forfeit
ore—*Git out*.

Jim's dream-song takes the band, and us, into his mind. It is in fact not empty

but crowded. The parade of scenes suggests that Wild West theatrics have supplanted Jim's own thoughts. But the band had it wrong. When Jim speaks, and when his "fevered innards" expel his attackers and he escapes, our relief comes mostly from knowing that an individual mind endures. Later poems pull back to a distant perspective, reporting on his actions from without, and we perceive Jim's humanity most closely through his remove.

His grim instinct wilting,
Dispiriting Jim, climbing hill's hilt,
drifting Jim, sighing in this liltling,
sinking light.

The lipogram's rule and the distant view yield a sense of a person—abhorrent and dejected—that no claim on his body or mind could have attained.

The later sections on present-day China and a software world of the future depict weakening barriers between self and group, identity and environment. Characters become even more exposed: a high-rise building in Hong's invented Chinese "boomtown" lacks an exterior wall, exposing its tenants' lives for public scrutiny; memories, in the future, are collected and stored in programmed clouds. These more fantastical scenarios carry a more familiar critique than Jim's West. But with playful, startling images and turns of phrase, they also surprise. A prose poem describing a painter of countless replica Rembrandts, for example, ends with a wonderful visceral image: "Today, I catch him sniffing his hand." The painter whose self-portraits show another's face eventually finds his own body strange. The poems become most necessary in moments like this one, when they return us to encounters we can comprehend only in their barest facts. Sadness and desire surface just often enough to convince us that we are near other selves. Hong creates these tensions through theme and anecdote, but most consistently through vocabulary and form. With its virtuosic variety, her language might seem to mimic the social forces always nearly overwhelming us. Instead, again and again, its accomplishment is distinctiveness, providing and preserving oddity and imagination where those qualities come most under threat.

Susannah Hollister