

Interconnectivities and Material Agencies: Consumption, Fashion, and Intimacy in

Zhu Tianwen's "Fin de Siècle Splendor"

She did not have time enough to feast her eyes on the world's many splendors; she decided that she'd create a brilliant future for herself whatever it might take. Material girls—why not? She'd worship things and she'd worship money. Youth and beauty were on her side; she worshiped her own beautiful body.

[...]

When she is old and her beauty faded, Mia will be able to support herself with her handicrafts. The abysmal blue of the lake tells her that the world men have built with theories and systems will collapse, and she with her memory of smells and colors will survive and rebuild the world from here.

(Zhu Tianwen, "Fin de Siècle Splendor," 393-394, 402)

The material girl who craves for world's splendor is Mia, the main character of "Fin de Siècle Splendor," one of the seven stories published by Zhu Tianwen in her 1990 collection *Fin-de-Siècle Splendour*. A volume of exquisite lyrical power, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendour* marked Zhu's break into mass popularity, particularly among urban readers of the Greater China region. Literary critics praised the volume for its modernist and postmodernist valences, more specifically for its capacity to present "the unrepresentable" and to enable its readership "to see only by making it impossible to see" (Lyotard qtd. in Chiang 2002, 53). At the core of *Fin-de-siècle Splendor* are the residents of 1992's Taipei—"the new species' (*xin renlei*) of young men and women zipping about on their red Fiat scooters; the McDonald's waitresses, homosexual artists, fashion models and soap opera directors" (Chiang 2002, 50). Among them is Mia, a fashion model and the main character of the title short story. "Fin de Siècle Splendor" takes place in the future, two years after its publication, close to the turn of the century, in 1992 Taipei. The title of the story contains the French for "end of century," a phrase that references a generation of

artists and thinkers who decried the cultural and social effects of modernization as it unfolded across many European countries at the end of the nineteenth century. The fin-de siècle rejection of materialism, rationalism, and positivism went hand in hand with an endorsement of subjectivism and irrationalism (Mestrovic 2010). Mia; her close girlfriends, Baby, Ann, and Joey; and her fashion-model male friends Kai, Yang Ge, and Ou live in a glamorous Taipei, a big city whose history and present are constructed through a language replete with popular-culture references from the US and Japan, designer brands of global prestige, and fragrances, textures, colors, tastes, forests, flowers, and herbs. Mia's incessant interest in fashion, fabrics, scent, and color is read as a symptom of "a culture that is saturated with commodities and in which the individual is subsumed in commercialism" (Wallace et al. 2013, 586). Her memories, pleasures, intimacies, and desires are woven into fragmented narrative lines that resist plotment, rendering past episodes of immersion into the splendors of the world and thus creating histories of fashion, intimacy, love, and urban transformation

I came across "Fin de Siècle Splendor" in February 2010, at workshop with Michael Hardt<sup>1</sup> organized by several graduate students in the Comparative Literature Program at Rutgers University. The workshop was designed to complement Hardt's talk "The Politics of the Common," in which he discussed his conception of the common in relation to questions of urban space and included a discussion of several short stories portraying cities around the globe. I was thus introduced to the city of Taipei through Mavis Tseng's<sup>2</sup> selection of "Fin de Siècle Splendor." Since then, I have been haunted by the story's complicated relation to postmodernist,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hardt teaches at Duke University and is best known for his trilogy of books—*Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009)—which he wrote with Antonio Negri.

<sup>2</sup> Mavis Tseng was at the time a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at Rutgers and was one of the organizers of this event.

materialist, and new materialist urban writing. In this chapter I seek to foreground the new materialist valences of the title story of Zhu's *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor* by positing it as an exploration of interconnecting affects, sensations, and memories. The material interconnections between Mia's human body and her "more-than-human worlds" (Alaimo 2010, 2) require a different kind of critical attention than that afforded by the postmodern lenses of literary theory. I argue that while *Fin de Siècle Splendor* is generally claimed as part of postmodern literature, a new materialist feminist reading of the story foregrounds certain novel ways of writing about the materiality of consumption in relation to the interactions and interconnections between sensorial-affective, psychic, biological, social, architectural, informational, technological, and nonhuman natural elements. Such aspects further add to the coordinates of a postmodern approach by producing a reading that could potentially enrich the ethical and political criticism of consumption, urban-environmental injustice, and modern epistemologies.

The interactions and interconnections that Zhu's narrative constructs between Mia and her worlds will first be contextualized by considerations that explain the relevance of new materialist paradigms to contemporary feminist praxis and then by a brief discussion of Zhu's own literary and political orientations. I will then turn to an overview of the critical approaches to consumption and consumerism that were mostly developed prior to the emergence of new materialist thinking. Since fashion is one of Mia's passions and fashion modeling is her profession, my analysis also undertakes an examination of the fashion industry in relation to gender, pleasure, consumption, and global affective economies. I conclude this chapter by summarizing the ways in which new materialist feminist accounts that foreground sensorial-affective interconnections may enrich our understanding of critical consumption by providing a fresh reconceptualization of interconnections and agencies that shape human practices as well as

the living and nonliving material worlds.

### Tenets of new materialist feminisms and more-than-representational geographies

New materialism is a term that unites the theoretical interventions that developed in the interdisciplinary space of social theory, the humanities, and biological sciences to criticize the anthropocentrism inherent in social constructivism. By reconsidering the suppressed agencies of inhuman biological forces, nonliving material entities, and more-than-human and nonhuman phenomena, new materialism discovers new terrains for ethics that address current crises of economic and environmental justice.

The shift to the analytical lens of new materialism developed in response to the linguistic turn in the humanities and the social constructionist turn in social sciences. The erasure of the agency of matter within postmodern analytical frameworks that foregrounded language, signification, and discourse constitutes the central tenet of new materialist theorization. Postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers who reacted to the epistemologies of modernism claimed that objective access to the natural world, or by extension, to reality, was enabled by the categories of the natural and the real, which are in fact knowable only inasmuch as they are constituted by language. At the same time, for feminists, the foregrounding of discourse and language as the constitutive ground of reality enabled invaluable theoretical and political gestures that aimed to deconstruct concepts that defined women and femininity as subordinate categories. Furthermore, postmodern feminists contested, resisted, pluralized, and redeployed notions of femininity and masculinity in ways that demonstrated that gendered meanings form within complex systems and are coconstitutive with other binary and hierarchized notions such as class, race, sexuality, disability, geopolitical location, or citizenship status. They also argued

that gendered dichotomies undergird all the other signifying binaries of Western thought: mind/body, rational/emotional, subject/object, and culture/nature (Alaimo and Hekman 2008). And whereas exposing the mechanisms of meaning that inform and normalize dichotomous thinking bore outstanding theoretical and political gains, the ambivalence that postmodern thinkers manifested in relation to the language/reality binary called for closer critical attention. I argue that as early as 1990, Zhu Tianwen's writing in fact expresses the tensions inherent in this ambivalence and that in *Fin de Siècle Splendor*, Zhu finds ways to narrate the materiality of the human body, the human-made world, and the natural world in ways that do not replicate the language/reality dualism.

In their quest for alternatives to the theoretical assumptions of social constructionism, feminist scholars thus became concerned with the conceptualization of bodies and natures as the inactive material ground for rational thought. Many turned to instances that demonstrated that the human body is a willful, active force and inquired what discursive possibilities might be available in order to render such moments and the lived experiences of pain, pleasure, disease, or joy intelligible in ways that account for biological substance (Alaimo and Hekman 2008). In reference to the social constructionist idea that the material world cannot be accessed in and of itself, Karen Barad called for a recognition of the fact that cultural intelligibility and the materiality of bodies and natures form a system of intra-actions (2007). Questions of knowledge, representation, epistemology, and ontology came to the fore in inquiries employing methodologies that sought to capture relations between the material and the discursive and to account for the part played by "the physicality of the body in the constitution of our embodied subjectivity" (Jagger 2014). In order to find an answer to these queries, Barad took up Niels Bohr's physics to refute the atomist view according to which the world is a collection of

individually determinate “things” and proposed an ontology of “phenomena,” which would account for “the inseparability of ‘observed object’ and ‘agencies of observation’” (Barad 2003, 813-14). Thus, matter is always within such “phenomena,” which are essentially material-discursive, with no primacy afforded to either side (Jagger 2014). The relationality of intra-actions is dynamic and ongoing. It is thus continually stabilizing and destabilizing properties, meanings, boundaries, and patterns. Barad’s intervention makes possible an understanding of the body as continuous with the world rather than as a bounded entity, separated from its environment by its epidermal barrier. It also opens new ways of understanding that the ongoing transformative potential of the world emerges in the context of intra-actions that intimately link discursive, corporeal, material, human, technological, and nonhuman phenomena (Alaimo and Hekman 2008).

In keeping with the ontology of phenomena outlined above, Zhu Tianwen describes her own writing as a form of expression committed to the nonordering representability of reality. The poetic register enables her “to present reality in ‘reflection’ [...] instead of by way of contrast” (Zhu in Chiang 2002, 50). Her lyrical descriptions of fluid embodiments, of bodies that pulse alongside the energies of other matters, converge with the approaches of feminist scholars whose investment lies in foregrounding material interconnectedness. In this sense, sensoriality and affective intensifications are invoked by new materialist thinking as a way of addressing the forces that, in Elizabeth Wissinger’s terms, “may only be observable in the interstices between bodies, between bodies and technologies, or between bodily forces and conscious knowledge” (Wissinger 2007, 232). Affects connect bodies, intensify their sensations, focus their attention and orient them onto paths of knowledge. Ultimately, affects, sensations, and interpretations are inseparable. Affects are forces that throw signification off balance and move individuals into

becoming other than what they are (Bruno 2008). Accounting for affects, sensations, and interpretations is deemed to enable a better understanding of the world, but most importantly, they are simultaneously seen to hold the potential for restructuring social meaning (Hemmings 2005, Massumi 2002, Sedgwick 2003).

The emphasis on sensoriality and affects described above is also found in the field of critical geographies, where new materialism is combined with an analytical orientation towards nonrepresentational theory, which seeks to make better sense of “our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds” (Lorimer 2005, 83). For geographer Nigel Thrift, the nonrepresentational project, rather than orienting its inquiries toward representation and meaning, is concerned with rendering “practices, mundane everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites” (1997, 142). Nonrepresentational geographers also foreground the nonhuman, the “more-than-human,” and the material world — all the elements within which the social is emplaced (Patchett 2010, Valentine 1999, Thrift 1997).

Ordinarily, representation is bound to a specific form of repetition: the repetition of the same. Marcus A. Donel writes: “Through representation, what has already been given will come to have been given again. Such is its fidelity to an original that is fated to return through a profusion of dutiful copies; an original whose identity is secured and re-secured through a perpetual return of the same and whose identity is threatened by the inherent capacity of the copy to be a deviant or degraded repetition, a repetition that may introduce an illicit differentiation in the place ostensibly reserved for an identification” (2010, 117). The feminist social constructionist critique of modern epistemologies was also concerned with claims for mimetic representability, realism, and truth, and thus many methodological innovations emphasized

notions of power, agency, subjectivity, and reflexivity. The challenge that remains, however, is how to bring materiality back into social theory in ways that do not lose sight of the valuable concepts and methodological innovations enabled by social constructionist perspectives. In this sense, Zhu's construction of Mia is relevant to issues of materiality and social constructionism in that it is choreographed to open the human onto the nonhuman and to interconnect biological elements and cultural practices to form a story about the phenomenon that we call Taipei.

### Critical inquiries into consumption and consumer cultures

Since the 1970s, consumerism has become one of the driving forces of global capitalism, extending its scope from the United States and Europe to other regions of the globe and, in particular, to the ascending economies of East and South Asia. David Harvey links the contemporary operations of global capitalism with the radical reshaping of the urban environment (1985). He argues that the global recession of the 1970s launched a new regime of accumulation which was reliant on accelerated production and consumption turnover times, flows of capital resources and of people across national boundaries, as well as on the deindustrialization of Western economies. Following Marx, consumer culture based on production is considered the ideological counterpart of these economic phenomena. Many critical arguments regarding global forms of commodified capitalist mass culture continue to be inspired by the contributions of the Frankfurt School thinkers who, as early as the mid-1940s, decried inauthenticity and the manipulative purpose and unsatisfying nature of mass culture and mass production (Barker 2008, 49). Meanings, representations, and practices were thus mobilized in the articulation of consumption as a way of life and of consumer choice as an attribute of citizenship. The act of consumption changed from the "mere acquisitions of

commodities” to the “basis for identity and selfhood” (Dunn 2008, 8). While critical approaches to consumption have most often been developed in relation to concepts of class, lifestyle, subjectivity, and identity, as well as structural divisions among producers and consumers, the framework of cultural hegemony that was implied by such arguments was later challenged by cultural studies scholars, who discussed the creative meaning-producing activities that accompanied communal forms of consumption. John Fiske emphasized the significance of consumers’ “popular vitality and creativity” as potential forces that motivate and enable social change (Fiske 1989, 8). In terms of postmodern consumption, the relation between consuming subjects and commodities sheds light on the fragmentations and contradictions caused by the arrival of post-Fordist globalized economies, under which accelerated turnover rates for goods and the rapid recoding of product differentiation affected consumers’ identity formation. Furthermore, in the context of globalization, consumer culture arguably converged with postmodernism in the decentering of the Western world and its epistemological categories, on the one hand, and in blurring the lines between art, culture, and commerce, on the other, through an aesthetic praxis of everyday life (Featherstone 1991).

A writer of postmodernity, Zhu creates worlds in which trends and fashions change swiftly, producing a visual overabundance of competing colors, textures, and forms. In this sense, the theoretical treatments of consumerism as hedonism as well as the Marxist critiques of commodity fetishism are also relevant to Zhu’s excursions in the sensorial-affective world. From the perspective of commodity aesthetics, commodities compensate for the sensual and social pleasure of rationalized and disenchanting modern societies (Dunn 2008, 108). Zygmunt Bauman argues that the power of commodities rests not so much with their capacity to respond to needs for personal status, possession, and accumulation but in fact commences prior to the enjoyment

of their functionality. Their power lies in their capacity to connect pleurably with the human sensorium: "The excitement of a new and unprecedented sensation—not the greed of acquiring and possessing nor wealth and its material tangible sense—is the name of the consumer game. Consumers are first and foremost gatherers of sensations, they are collectors of things only in secondary and derivative" (1999, 3). According to the interpretive framework of hedonistic consumption, desires and pleasures are derived from social meanings that are linked to the notions of gratification through personal growth, fulfillment, enjoyment, happiness, and pleasure. Commodity-oriented societies are thus also predicated on individualism, which invests the self with a heightened sense of agency in relation to the material world of commodities as well as to its own self-making and self-realization (Dunn 2008, 112). If consumerist pleasures are not primarily, or even exclusively, located within the meaning-making processes of consumer culture, the question then becomes: what possibilities for critical consumption could be imagined around the subjectivity and materiality of the sensing consumer? Whereas it is undeniable that we experience the world through our senses, affects, and emotions, contemporary sensory studies scholars signal that the human body has already been mapped and incorporated by the hyperconsumerist orientation of contemporary capitalism. Phillip Vannini, Dennis Waskul, and Simon Gottschalk note that the "enhanced sensory pleasures that are embedded in the shapes, textures, and the designs of new commodities" downplay sense-making and augment the impact of the sensorial to the point that memory is also altered through the promise of enhancements to prior sensory experience (Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk 2012, 156-57).

Feminist sociologists have recently introduced the notion of "intimacy" into their exploration of consumption in order to unearth the ways in which "emotions intersect with cultural and economic forms of exchange" (Casey and Taylor 2014, 131). The framework of intimacy has

thus allowed them to foreground the experiences of women and the scale of the household, but more importantly this approach has opened up an understanding of how socialities of help, caregiving, and support are mediated by consumption in the neoliberal contexts of welfare reform and austerity (Casey and Taylor 2014, 132).

### Zhu Tianwen's cultural politics in the context of a rapidly changing Taiwan

Considered one of the best known women writers in Taiwan's contemporary literature, Zhu Tianwen's writing bears the marks of her own cultural politics in the context of Taiwan's historical relations with mainland China, Japan, and the Western capitalist world. In tracing the genealogy of Zhu's cultural politics, Shu-Chen Chiang differentiates between her initial commitment and passionate support of China's mainland-oriented promotion of traditional high Chinese culture and the author's later critical approaches to notions of cultural authenticity. Zhu's subsequent adoption of more complex and multilayered cultural politics is reflected in texts that portray Taiwan's multiplicity of difference, intranational traditions, complicated identities, and social realities (Chiang 2002).

Taiwan's realities are shaped by regional and global colonial and neocolonial relations. It is currently a multiparty democracy under the Republic of China government. Japan renounced its territorial rights to Taiwan in 1952, bringing to an end the colonial governance of Taiwan as one of the Japanese Home Islands and its attendant policies of assimilation (Katz 2005). Following the end of the Second World War, Taiwan entered a four-decade-long single-party rule by Kuomintang (KMT). Under the KMT the notion of "Taiwanese" became a regional identity, oftentimes deployed against mainland Chinese people living on the continent as well as against the mainland Chinese people who followed the KMT to Taiwan between 1945 and 1949.

The political liberalization of 1970s and 1980s reshaped the concept of “Taiwanese” into a politicized ethnocentric category deployed by social movements against the authoritarian KMT regime (Corcuff 2002). During the KMT government, Taiwan was defined in anticommunist terms and strategically constructed as the “last outpost of traditional Chinese high culture” (Chiang 2002, 47). Zhu’s initial political views and cultural politics thus aligned with the mainland majority’s devaluation of Taiwanese culture for being a mix of “the Chinese outback and Japanese imperialism.” A second-generation mainlander born in Taipei, Zhu encountered a group of progressive young filmmakers (who later became known as “the New Cinema”), many of whom had similar upbringing trajectories that intertwined “mainland Chinese heritage, Taiwanese upbringing, and Western and Japanese influences” (Chiang 2002, 47). The works of these young filmmakers challenged the grand narrative promoted by the KMT government in their commitment to relaying multiple voices and to presenting a plurality of narratives; they thus left an indelible mark on Zhu’s cultural politics. Critics agree that after her encounter with the New Cinema group, the postmodern themes characteristic of globalization moved to the core of Zhu’s prose.

Compared to mainland China, Taiwan moved faster towards modernization and industrialization (Chia, Allred, and Jerzak 1997, 138). From the first decade of KMT rule, women's work was summoned in support of the consolidation of the state. Policies encouraging more active roles for women outside of the family were adopted simultaneously with the implementation of programs of formal education aiming to develop motherhood skills and of welfare measures seeking to address the economic needs of mothers (Chen 2009, 235). The economic development that was encouraged by U.S. economic aid in the 1950s relied significantly on an economic model of growth that placed cheap labor at the center of its

mechanisms for capital accumulation. From the mid-1960s to mid-1980s, women's cheap and flexible labor constituted the primary resource of Taiwan's labor-intensive export-oriented economy. The ripples of the 1967 Cultural Revolution in mainland China shored up traditional notions of gender and family, realigning women's work with the space of the family rather than with the economic needs of the state (Chen 2009, 237). However, in the mid-1980s, pressures for change in the ways that the government was managing labor came from both social movements and the administrators of neoliberal global capitalism. Women's groups required "a reasonable social and legal system of gender equality" (Chen 2009, 237), whereas capitalists pushed for further labor deregulation as a means to "enhance their flexibility to utilize labor to cope with the changing economic environment" (Chen 2009, 237). As neoliberal arguments for "economic efficiency" won more and more ground, women became more politicized and demanded that their right to work not be dictated by the needs of the state or those of the free market. They exposed the patriarchal operations of both state and market and required the state and private employers to share the costs of social reproduction beyond the paradigm of child-care provision for the purpose of accumulation. With the globalization of care work for children and the elderly, Taiwan became a receiving country. Nevertheless, the government strictly controlled the number of "foreign maids" entering the country in order to prevent a too-sharp increase in the employment of local women—a trend that, according to neoliberal economists, runs parallel with the presence of immigrant care workers. Concurrently, starting in the 1980s, the mass media engaged in a twofold ideological project: on one hand, they targeted local audiences with messages that espoused "native patriarchies and nationalist/nativist sentiments," while on the other hand, at a regional level, they operated fully in the service of consumption, "strategically suppressing native patriarchal and nationalist sentiments in order to maximize market expansion"

(Shih 1998, 288). Youths in particular became the main target of contradictory messages, some of which encouraged them to partake in the new consumer lifestyle of the booming urban environments, while others tried to curb consumption. The rationale behind the latter surpassed the motivational force of nationalist sentiments. The government of Taiwan also encouraged people to put a large portion of their income into savings as a way of avoiding becoming dependent on international borrowing. At the turn of the century Taiwan was among the nations with the highest capital reserves in the world (Chua 2000). Moreover, its antiwelfarist orientation deprived its citizens of the consumption subsidies usually provided as public services in the so-called developed nations (e.g., child care and elderly care), which forced young middle-class families to hire domestic workers from the poorer neighboring countries and ultimately reduced their income for discretionary expenditures (Chua 2000, 10-14).

The gender relations in Zhu's portrayals of global postmodernity are generally considered to be at odds with feminist ideas. Chiang writes: "Unlike other Taiwanese women writers, she never enacts familiar feminist motifs such as selfhood, economic autonomy, sexual awakening, patriarchal domination, motherhood or sisterhood. These issues for her are no longer problems as they are already subsumed under the spectacular decadence termed as 'postmodern' by the writer herself" (Chiang 2002, 45). I argue that in fact, Zhu's writing illuminates significant feminist concerns about the cultural and economic transformations that were introduced, embraced, or challenged in the rapidly changing world of post-1970s Taiwan and is thus relevant to the feminist interventions that critique neoliberal globalization. Besides, the feminist tropes identified by Chiang (selfhood, economic autonomy, sexual awakening, patriarchal domination, motherhood or sisterhood) are in fact tackled in "Fin de Siècle Splendor," but not in the recognizable vocabularies of liberal or difference feminisms. Such feminist tropes are subtly

implied in Mia's sensual memories, in her observations of Taipei's rapidly transforming urban environment, as well as in her explanations of fashion trends. By profession, Mia is a fashion model. Her work in the global world of fashion places her at the intersection of significant transformations of production, work, and consumption practices. Fashion styles, products, affects, trends, pleasures, and ideas of beauty cross borders swiftly, and their impact is spatial, cultural, social, and aesthetic. Mia feels that her homeland is the "city-confederacy of Taipei, Milan, Paris, London, Tokyo and New York. She lives here, steeped in its customs, well versed in its artistry, polished by its culture, ready to merge as one of its permanent representative" (Zhu 2007, 401).

The feminist politics of the story are partly oriented toward epistemology, partly oriented toward imaging new worlds out of the current terms and practices of global capitalism: "The world men have built with theories and systems will collapse, and [Mia] with her memory of smells and colors will survive and rebuild the world from here" (Zhu 2007, 402). From childhood, Mia revolts against the patriarchal ordering of things. While her lovers are men, her circle of intimacies challenges heteronormative dictates. Her friendship with Baby constitutes one of the more ample narrative arcs of the story. In their younger years Mia and Baby were inseparable. With Baby embracing more conservative values, their friendship is challenged first by Mia's bold fashion choices, then by her materialism, and ultimately by her decision to pursue a relationship with wealthy yet married Duan. Baby's decision to get married could have been made in order to spite Mia. Years later, Mia finds Baby, who is now divorced and the mother of a three-year-old daughter. Mia runs a flower shop - also selling food - which becomes the space for her girlfriends' meetings. Mia recalls:

The flower shop with its complex mixture of scents is like a Byzantine tapestry; the aroma of coffee wafts in the air, recalling the ancient age of handicrafts. Joe is

responsible for the food served in the flower shop: homemade fruitcakes, cheese pie, oatmeal biscuits and flower-petal puddings (Zhu 2007, 397).

Baby's flower shop is the space where consumption, production, and commercial endeavors intersect with intimacy and thus form nonheteronormative affective and social relations. The threads of Mia's observations call for a consideration of the discursive and material investments that form and maintain the categorical impositions that establish "the domestic" as economically irrelevant (Waring 1989) and render heterosexual nuclear families as the norm for the organization of sexuality, sociality, work, care, and solidarity in "the private" sphere (Berlant 2000). The forces that orient and connect Mia and her intimate others exceed both the boundaries of human bodies and the restrictive meanings of sexuality. Many of these forces are nonhuman and of great sensorial-affective impact. Duan, girlfriends, best friends, and past boyfriends constitute Mia's social milieu, yet her recollections thread seamlessly encounters with gestures, colors, fragrances, feelings, textures, the island's climate, personal styles, fashion trends, friends, skylines, forests, and the rest of the world's splendors. The realization of the world's inexhaustible beauties turns Mia to materialism.

It is important to note that in gendering her characters and constructing their nonheteronormative sexual pleasures and intimacies, Zhu converges with the politics of women's groups who mobilized to challenge and change gender and sexuality norms by voicing their erotic thoughts, feelings, grievances, and desires, thus breaking with the culture of silence that used to envelope sexuality.

Furthermore, Mia's profession as a fashion model and her intimate relationship with Duan, an older married businessman, mirror key demographic and economic transformations undergone in Taiwan, as well as ideological processes engaged in the attendant redefinition of gender in relation to work, family, and the nation. As Shu-mei Shih points out, patriarchal

representations of mainland women in popular media form at the intersection of multiple overdeterminations. She explains the emergence of the figure of the *dulamei*:

the 'mainland women' as a category becomes overlaid with meanings beyond the biological and economic determinations ordinarily apparent. Although these are the bodies that serve as prostitutes and wives in Taiwan and Hong Kong, as mistresses and surrogate mothers for Taiwan and Hong Kong businessmen in coastal cities in China [...] and accordingly their representation is heavily "bodied", they also carry potent political and cultural meanings in their signification.[...] When this power was threatened by the *dalumei*'s clever maneuvers, the Taiwanese businessmen were reminded of their status as "simpleton compatriots," and the *dalumei* has increasingly come to embody threat. She is not merely a threat to Taiwanese businessmen's pocketbooks, but a generalized threat to Taiwan's capital and industrial advantage as Taiwan becomes more and more dependent on Chinese labor and the mainland market. She is even a threat to Taiwan's national security. (1998, 293-94)

Shih also notes that Taiwanese feminists were slow to take on the representational violence directed at women immigrants from the mainland. While there is no textual evidence to link Mia and Duan to a specific ethnicity, their love story comes intriguingly close to expressing the region's "new geopolitics of desire" discussed by Shih (1998, 294). However, the relationship between Mia and Duan does not conform to the representational conventions that newspapers and magazines use when portraying Taiwanese businessmen and people living on the mainland. By no means the classical *dalumei*, Mia is undeniably beautiful and materialistic yet as far as one can get from the standards of the media's flat character. In this sense, Zhu's nuanced treatment of local and regional, past and present patriarchies appears to fill in a critical gap left behind by Taiwanese feminists.

Regional and global geopolitics have thus shaped Taiwan culturally, economically, and politically. Global capitalism has left its marks—ubiquitous commodification and reification—on Taiwanese society, while Taiwan's speedy economic takeoff into the circuit of global capital and into the world market of the 1970s virtually compressed the two hundred years of industrial modernity in the West into just a few decades (Wang 2007). As flows of images, commodities,

and capital criss-cross the globalized terrain of Taipei, critics of global capitalism warn against the lost cultural integrity of nations, against the hegemonization of the global vocabulary of consumerism, as well as against individualism. “Fin de Siècle Splendor” could be read as a lyrical critique of the societal changes brought about by global capitalism at the end of the twentieth century. In his reading of Zhu, Ban Wang encounters a suffocating Taipei that deprives “the residents of breathing room” (2007, 374). The city’s youngsters are caught in circuits of imitative performance, modeling their behaviors after those “of superstars and celebrities in the metropolitan centers of the West” (2007, 374). Similar forces shape Taipei residents’ “lifestyles... looks, and aesthetic tastes,” while an engulfing commodification “erases the memory of how objects and life environments are made by humans, over long period of time” (2007, 374). From Zhu’s story, Wang teases out the effects that modernization and global capitalism inflict on subjectivities, social relations, and urban spaces. In his view, their emergence is accompanied by the dissolution of premodern communities. Thus, the operations of economic development, mass culture, and industrialized production account for the loss of the world of collective attachments, feelings of belonging, memories of the past, local knowledges, and nonalienating forms of work. Moreover, commodity manufacturing and consumption lead to the transformation of the organic world of the village and its networks of kinship, intimacy, work, and pleasure into the alienating, abstracting, and reifying sociocultural milieu of the metropolis (Wang 2007, 371-72). In a Marxist vein, these changes result in the reification of human life and labor. Furthermore, media and advertising colonize the human sensorium and cognition, transforming citizens into a mass of passive consumers. Ultimately, Wang sees in Zhu’s writing a nostalgic gesturing towards the past, as her characters take refuge in the memory of “things, feelings, relations, stories, myth—the green grass beyond the dreary and monotonous

cityscape” (Wang 2007, 376).

While the temporality of post-1970s material-discursive transformations of Taiwan are undoubtedly central themes that Zhu tackles in “Fin de Siècle Splendor,” I argue that the politics of the story are more ambivalent and could in fact be read as future-oriented. Moreover, in Mia’s recounting of her childhood, Zhu articulates one of her most overtly feminist critiques of social and material practice. Fragrances, textures, clothing, work, family members, and concepts of gender come together in a recollection triggered by White Orchid powdered detergent:

In those days, Mia has seen clothes hung out to dry on bamboo poles stuck between a willow tree and a wall. [...] After a whole day in the sun, the clothes became hard and rough. When she put them on, the distinct difference between cloth and flesh reminded her of the existence of her clean body. Mother folded the family’s clothes up for easy storage; women’s clothes has to be put under men’s, just as she insisted that men’s clothes had to be hung in front of women’s. Mia fought openly against this taboo; her young mind wanted to see whether this would bring a natural disaster. After the willow tree has been cut down and the land repossessed by the government for public housing, her elder sisters got married and her mother grew old (Zhu 2007, 390).

Wang’s own nostalgic inclination reduces Zhu’s complex worlds to an economically deterministic argument that romanticizes Taiwan’s Chinese rural past. While never direct or didactic, Mia’s “gentle memory” reminds us of the gendered forms of work and gender hierarchies of premodern Taiwan. What then are the elements, ideas and, forces that orient Zhu’s story toward the future?

Mia’s observations of the architectural environment relay the understanding of the built environment as always and already incorporable and entangled with climatic forces and ge-agencies of the island. In their turn, these nonhuman forces and agencies have long been incorporated in the unique life experiences, knowledges, and material production practices of the island’s dwellers. In a conversation with Duan, Mia remarks: “Our predecessors’ accumulated

life experiences has given us a building style that copes well with Taiwan's climate: light-weight. It is different from the West and again different from Japan: light in form, in space, and in visuality, it provides breathing space for the crowded sunbaked cities of Taiwan. According to I.M. Pei, style emerges from problem solving.” Duan, a constructor and architect himself, responds: “If Pei had not had a group of technicians to help him solve the problems, the glass on his pyramid at the Louvre would not have had the glittering transparency” (Zhu 2007, 389). Zhu deftly renders the interaction of culture, history, technology, biology, and geology, without privileging any of their agencies. While all the recounted thoughts, sensations, feelings, affects, emotions, memories, and judgments contained in “Fin de Siècle Splendor” are Mia’s, they continually weave her existence into past and present worlds, where the distinctions between the intimate and the public are at times hard to set apart. Mia and Duan’s moments of aesthetic intimacy on the terrace of her ninth-floor apartment, her trips to the mountains with her boyfriends from the fashion industry, and her visits at Baby’s flower shop allow for the consideration of entanglements among intimacy, urban infrastructures, capitalist forces of development, homophobia, postcolonial conditions, and national security. A materialist reading of Mia’s intimacies invalidates Wang’s decrying of suffocating Taipei, at least inasmuch as her existence is concerned. But surely, Wang’s observation is correct in many other life contexts. Critical geographers already pointed out that cities have never developed evenly and equitably. Urban decay, development, and creation follow the tracks of existing inequalities, adding new elements to the phenomenon of poverty (Wilson forthcoming 2015).

### The human and more-than-human agencies of fashion

One of the core engines of contemporary consumer societies is fashion. Its critics,

consumers, and supporters would most likely agree that, as one of the most materialist industries, fashion is the epitome of contemporary consumerism. The meanings of the word “fashion” connect the material world of clothes and garment industry to the abstract ideas of trend and style. Its constant creation of new products and desires goes hand in hand with the creation of new global geographies of natural labor and natural resources extraction. Fashion thus matters beyond the symbolic functions of its signs, meanings, embodied practices, and performative styles. The fashion industry is currently a system of global material relations with intimate ties to local ecologies.

Many cultural theorists and sociologists turn to fashion in order to critique the conformist pressures of advanced capitalist consumer cultures. Being “in fashion” simultaneously evokes notions of conformity, markers of status and wealth, and a sense of belonging to certain groups, which renders fashion a component of complex articulations of social and cultural identity. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir denounced fashion for its power to enslave women, negate their independent individuality and potential for transcendence, and ultimately subsume them under male agency and desire (Beauvoir 1953). Three decades later, U.S. author activist-author Susan Browmiller identified feminine fashion as one of the social-aesthetic practices that maintains gender difference and fuels female oppression. She was a strong advocate of women wearing trousers, arguing that by obscuring sartorial differences between women and men, sexism might diminish (Henry 2012, 17-18). Whereas versions of these arguments still inform the sartorial codes of professional and corporate cultures, the rejection of feminine fashion and the endorsement of masculine dress codes as a feminist statement or a gender-free alternative came, however, under critique as soon as the 1980s. Georg Simmel pointed out that despite its firm grounding in imitation, fashion allows individuals to act upon their desires for “union and

segregation” (1971 297). Judith Butler, on the other hand, explained that "style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities" (Butler 1988, 521).

Zhu constructs Mia’s relation to the world of fashion in ways that capture the forces of subjectivity formation, their moments of creative repletion, resistance to old meanings, and resignification. Mia's career in fashion modeling takes off with an outstanding performance of imitation: she impersonates the ultimate material girl, Madonna, in a look-alike competition. She is a fine aesthete, and as with fashion, her preference for certain styles changes with the passing of time. On her life trajectory, army-style outfits follow the “beggary trend” of perforated clothing that she used to love at the age of fifteen. Pierre Cardin's fashion and the rose-red cashmere V-neck pullovers entered Mia’s life along with her crush on the Japanese actor and model Abe Hiroshi. Then follows the trend of androgyny. She observed how “[t]he fear of AIDS led to a new fashion trend: feminine clothes for women and gentleman's look for men; unisex clothes all disappeared,” and she too “said good-bye to her hermaphroditic dress code, which has passed through phases of David Bowie, Boy George and Prince" (395). Mia is also an astute observer of her friends’ relations to fashion. When her friend Gee decides to part with her three-piece suits with heavy shoulder pads, Mia explains: “The career women's stiff outfit is like a housewife’s apron; wearing it constantly equals giving up your rights as a woman [...]. She fully intends to take advantage of the fact that she is a woman, and the more feminine a woman is the more she can get out of men. Gee has learned to camouflage her vicious designs with a low profile and since then success has come with much less effort on her part” (390-91). Thus, Gee’s disavowal of business attire and her reorientation towards femininity mirror the changes in feminist critiques of fashion, where the rejection of the feminine aesthetic and the gendered

normativity of beauty coexists with reformist arguments that advocate diversifying notions of beauty, femininity, and masculinity (Henry 2012, 24) and exposing the artifice and performative character of clothing, gender, and sexual normativities.

In Mia's world, doing gender through fashion creates spaces of intimacy and manifestations of desire that transgress the limits of heteronormativity. Fashion, pleasure, intimacy, material cultures, and work connect Mia and her friends, Ann, Joey, Wanyu, Baby, Christine, Gee, Kai, and Ou in a network of sociability that includes material agencies. Mia's reflections indicate clearly that the mutability of fashion trends is accompanied by societal and personal shifts in notions of femininity and masculinity, the emergence of new health and disease ecologies, geographical and climate forces, transformations in the human-built environment, and subsequent reorientations and replacements of pleasures and intimacies. Mia and her best friend Baby wear "a pair of moon and star earrings: one was on Baby's right ear, the other on Mia's left ear [...]. Together they mapped out their dream-plan of opening a shop someday." (2007, 395). Comradeship is the term that Mia uses to describe her relation to Kai, her male partner for magazine fashion features, yet she is also in love with him. Kai is a very handsome man, who "loved only himself, and he treated Mia as his beloved brother, Narcissus" (2007, 393). Ann, a beautician who "exudes a cold smell of scrub creams" and prefers her vibrator to having sex with men or women, dislocates sexuality from the realm of essentialism and binary notions, through her desirous orientation to sexual gratifications outside the realm of interpersonal encounters. In their youth Mia and her friends, Yang Ge, Ah Xun and his wife Ou, "Ant," Kai, and the Yuan brothers, would drive to the mountains, where they smoked a marijuana joint and passed around a bottle of Chinese liquor. Such nights gave Mia the feeling that "[they] were making love with Nature" (2007, 392). Mia is also in love with Yang Ge and

the attraction between them formed somewhere between the vegetal world of “dead bamboo trees and sharp bamboo shoots” where “his warm, fleshy hand [let] her know his intentions” in the “air of nonchalance created by his old blue jeans and faded khaki” (2007, 393).

All her recollections take Mia from a sensorial-affective present into a recollected past or critically appraised present. A magazine photo shoot that recreated the image of the Duanhuang cave painting has Mia and Wanyu model a collection of cutwork rayon. The encounter with rayon triggers Mia’s scrutiny of this semisynthetic fiber, its emergence and existence at the intersection of material, technological, economic, creative, and destructive forces: “Rayon is made from wood paste; it has the feel of cotton but it is more absorbent and hangs better. Besides, rayon chiffon is just a third the price of silk chiffon [...]. In damp, sizzling weather rayon turns moldy easily” (2007, 391). Mia’s reflections on the degradation of rayon prompt her to worry about “the jars and bunches of dried flowers and dried reeds in her house,” which constitute the objects in both an epistemological quest and a business project, as she plans that soon after retiring from fashion modeling, she “will be able to support herself with her handicrafts” (2007, 402). Among “dried flowers and herbs [...] Chinese orchids, African violets, potted pineapples, Peacock coconuts, and all sorts of nameless ferns,” Duan often gets the sense that he is with a medieval monk. Oftentimes, Mia and Duan get lost in the contemplation of the city skyline:

Prawn-red, salmon-red, linen-yellow, reed-yellow; the sky turns from peach to emerald [...]. They indulge themselves aesthetically so much that either their energy is exhausted in the process or their spirit shattered by the overwhelming spectacle, and very often they do not even do what lovers are supposed to do. (2007, 389)

The color and shapes of the natural world are synesthetically connected to the taste of peppermint herb tea and to the colors and shapes of the 1990 summer show and the previous 1989 autumn/winter trend:

Those were not the colorful prints of the Caribbean but of the North Pole shores. Several icebergs from Greenland floating in the misty North poles seas, every breath was ice-cold. All was snow-white, with hints of green or traces of emerald. The details were a continuation of the 1989 autumn/winter trend— lace was given new life with mesh patterns or braided with motifs of fish fins and shells. (2007, 389)

However, the appropriation of nature by fashion operates not only in relation to aesthetic ideas but also in relation to material life. Zhu traces lines of continuity between the animal fur featured in the 1989 collections by Christian Lacroix, Moschino, and Ferre and the old British Empire's visual vocabulary of exploration and its attendant commodities: "the stuffed animals [...] imported from their colonies" (2007, 397). Ecological protection, observes Mia, led to the subsequent trend of fake fur in the winter of 1990. While she disagrees with the concept of fake fur that "could pass for the real thing," the trend of the following year converges with her views on fashion and environmentalism. Mia reflects:

But what's the point of imitating the real thing? It's just foolish. Much better for the fake items to be self-mocking, which is in line with the modern spirit, somewhat witty and quite cute [...]. Mia's '91 anti-fur show, with its variations of fake furs dyed red and green was cute and trendy. (2007, 397)

Elizabeth Wissinger situates the development of affective economies within the larger context of the consolidation of the service sector and the consumer economy of global postindustrial capitalism, where "capital shifts its domain of accumulation to bodily pre-individual forces such that value is produced through enlivening, capacitating, and modulating affect" (2007, 234). Affective labor and the production of care and emotions sits thus at the core of the industries subsumed into the affective economy. In certain industries, these outputs require unmediated forms of presence and proximity, however in other industries such as fashion modeling, the production of affect can be achieved through mediated contact. Clearly, fashion models must produce and maintain bodies that measure up to the aesthetic standards of the industry. However their bodies and work reach past the manufacturing of mere appearance.

Fashion models also “manipulate affect or feeling by acting, engaging, and connecting with themselves and others, with the goal of stimulating and projecting a feeling of vitality and aliveness” (2007, 235). While representational critiques of fashion and modeling focus on the production and hegemonization of particular ideas of femininity, masculinity, beauty, attractiveness, health, and happiness, the new materialist approach supplements the narrative of subjectivity formation with an effort to account for moments of intensified sensation, focused attention, and augmented feeling which ultimately fuel our orientations and connections with the world. Wissinger’s fieldwork in the world of fashion shows unequivocally that the goal of modeling work is in fact “the stimulation of affective energy” (2007, 241). The production of affect reaches past the contagious communication of facial and corporeal expression, as many fashion models emphasize that they strive to enable unplanned and unexpected moments that translate into images and energies that are “beyond the borders of conventional interpretation” and thus “not immediately assimilable to consciousness” (Wissinger 2007, 243).

In writing Mia and in writing about Mia’s worlds of works, loves, friendships, affects, feelings, and sensations, Zhu Tianwen interlaces social, symbolic, aesthetic, economic, and material agencies. Her relation to the material culture of the fashion industry is at once aesthetic, social, sensual, and economic. While creative expressions that foreground individuality and enable nonheteronormative intimacies materialize every so often, the speed of commodification prompts Mia to adopt a state of continued critical alertness. From an affective perspective, the temporality of fashion is simultaneously orientated toward the past and the future. Deconstructed looks, bold and punchy aesthetics, militaristic prints, power suits, cashmere sweaters, and flowing silks in vibrant hues feature in looks and trends that will elicit affective notes of familiarity and nostalgia along with enthusiasm for novelty and innovation (Henry 2012, 25).

Beyond these, textures and colors take hold of the body's sensorium and grant fashion material forces of attraction that supplement those operating within the realm of the symbolic. Tracing the emergence of fashion icons and iconoclasts in relation to the current phenomena of "globalization, cultural imperatives of self-expression, dilemmas of sexualization that trade on racial and gender politics, co-optation and cultural appropriation, and casual rhetoric of social change" (Tarrant and Jolles 2012, 9) is key to the development of critical accounts to contemporary consumption. Yet the attention given to embedded and situated actions should reach past the limit of the human and its sociocultural dimensions. By opening the scope of such inquiries toward the realm of the more-than-human and the agency of bodies and natures, a better understanding of the current global order and its potential alternatives can emerge.

### Conclusion

The interconnections between the human, more-than-human, and nonhuman material agencies captured by Zhu Tianwen in "Fin de Siècle Splendor" open up new analytical, ethical, and political perspectives. Mia's work in the fashion industry further destabilizes the distinctions between the psyche and the market, the local and the global. As a fashion model, her existence is interwoven with phenomena, bodies, and technologies that are constitutive of the global affective economies. Mia's work entails more than producing meanings, representations, and images. She is never engaged in acts of conspicuous consumption or in the construction of consumerist subject identities that would already be meaningful, interpretable, and identifiable. Her own sensual descriptions that link the human sensorium to the elements of urban infrastructure and the natural world are nevertheless interconnected with the other technologies of contemporary capitalism (e.g., biotechnology, surveillance, information and entertainment technologies), which

are primarily invested in intensifying the flow of energy between bodies. Under particular material circumstances, some of these flows morph into desires, and some desires further materialize in acts of consumption. Thus, for the critic of consumerism, the identification of the material-discursive conditions that slow down such flows could aid in imagining a new ethics and a new politics of consumption. Finally, the very possibility of the stagnation of flows or of a stoppage in consumption calls for the imagination of *an outside* to capitalism. The latter can be better understood in relation to the concept of affective labor, which has been theorized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004). The emergence of affective labor under conditions of global capitalism makes it impossible to distinguish between production and reproduction, which renders human subjects simultaneously products and producers of the unitary machine of capitalism, leaving no signs, subjects, values, or practices that are outside of it (Hardt and Negri 2000). I would argue that the materialist portrait of Taipei's turn-of-the-century global capitalism proposed by Zhu maintains the hope that even in the absence of an absolute outside to capitalism, alternative economic practices, socialities of care, and an ethics of justice could emerge within the multitude of material and discursive conditions of which we are part.

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