The biopolitics of languaging in the cybernetic fold: a decolonial and queer ear to the cosmo-poetics

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ABSTRACT
Prompted by Susan Sontag’s ‘The World as India’ (2002), in which the young employees at outsourced call centres in India figure the distinction between human and machine, this article explores languaging as a biopolitical process of racialization and speciation in an era of cybernetics. To this end, the article engages with Caribbean critic Sylvia Wynter and Asian American writer Margaret Rhee, whose works illuminate human linguistic practice as decolonial and queering modes of engendering and inhabiting the more-than-human world. First, this article attempts a decolonialist intervention into posthumanist performativity in conversation with Wynter’s theory of homo narrans, and especially her hypothesis on the cybernetic autopoiesis of diverse cosmogonies. Then, the article discusses Margaret Rhee’s poetry Robot, Love (2017) and her Kimchi Poetry Machine project (debut 2014), which engage with poetry as an intimate interaction between human and machine against a backdrop of the queer genealogy of artificial intelligence and the fractured affinities between robots and Asian Americans. In conclusion, this article calls for a decolonial approach to posthuman linguistic performativity, which is less a territory for securing humanity than a decolonial and diasporic feminist technology of listening to difference – which I call cosmo-poetics.

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Introduction

In her 2002 St. Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation titled ‘The World as India’, Susan Sontag attests to the distinctiveness of the human translator from the computer, which ‘will soon be able to perform most translating tasks’. Sontag anticipated that the human translator would survive at least in the field of literature, where he must engage with ‘ethical standards’ in order to choose certain losses from among many in the translation from one language to another. This agony of loss is lacking in the machine counterpart, which simply finds equivalence between two languages. Interestingly, Sontag offers an example of such loss in American-outsourced call centres in India, where operators are trained to erase their Indian accent in order to sound American. For Sontag, these operators (who are also required to perform assigned American identities, including American names with little biographies) are a perfect example of the loss of authenticity in assimilative translation. Sontag further suggests that India – where the colonial conqueror’s speech is the national language by necessity among the variety of local languages – models ‘the World’, where English has become a new lingua franca. Sontag’s lecture is rather ambiguous about her political position, but it has nonetheless stirred debate. Literary critic Trivedi (2003) criticizes Sontag for overlooking that English is a fulcrum of the neo-colonial exploitation of ‘cyber-coolies’, while Das
(2003) among others opposes Trivedi, praising the English competency of these operators as ‘a passport for becoming a master of the universe’ in the globalizing world.

There have been rich discussions on these outsourced call centres and English as a global language since Sontag’s lecture. However, even more relevant over the past 15 years is that both sides postulate the political meaning of these English-speaking Indian operators in reference to the relationship between human and technology. In Sontag’s (2002) speech, the operators’ labour is portrayed as ‘pretending’ in order to ‘pass for Americans’ – in striking resonance with the Turing test (Turing, 1950), which was designed to determine whether a computer has human-like intelligence by measuring its capacity to imitate a gendered person (man) in conversation. As such, these operators embody the inevitable loss of authenticity in the globalizing world, the pangs of which evidence the ethical agency of the human (except the operators themselves) as distinct from the computer. In the cyber-coolie debate, the proximity of these young Indians to information technology (IT) conditions how language skills mediate their relationship with the world (as either neo-colonial labour force or ‘master of the universe’). In this light, Sontag’s (2002) lecture and the subsequent debates illustrate postcolonial languaging as a biopolitical event that enacts geopolitical substrates among human groups (racialization) by construing their humanity in relation to information technology (speciation). Such an approach allows us to re-examine this linguistic performativity as intrinsically contiguous with the intersections of race and species (and also gender, as I will explain), informing the planetary stratification and circulation of the population in their relation to production, consumption, and disposability. Furthermore, it urges us to explore the political potentialities and limitations of such performativity – for example, if we think of the Indian operators simulating an American accent as not so much of a problem of inauthentic identity but a performative instance of dis/identification (or becoming robotlike-non/American) in the cybernetic matrix of postcolonial and neoliberal globalization.

Taking Sontag’s lecture as its point of departure, this article explores the works of Caribbean critic Sylvia Wynter and Asian American artist and scholar Margaret Rhee to develop a decolonial and posthuman feminist approach to languaging as a biopolitical event of racialization-as-speciation in the era of cybernetics. The next part of this article is a decolonial resurfacing of linguistic practice as an essential site of biopolitics, where the modern project of the human-as-species enflashes itself in the colonial(ist) project of racialization. The analysis engages with Wynter’s theory of homo narrans (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015), which explains how our cosmogonies – through their co-evolution with our brain – autopoietically institute multiple genres of being human, in challenge to the over-representation of the West-centric Man as the human (p. 72).

Drawing upon the cybernetic concept of autopoiesis to revalidate storytelling as a key praxis of being human, Wynter’s theory makes an interesting intervention into current posthuman(ist) theories, which have offered crucial criticism on the human-exceptionalist assertion of language prevalent in existing critical theories. Such currents, however, have resulted in overlooking how language is an important site where humanity has been asserted, denied, and cultivated in the colonial and postcolonial world. In that light, this article engages with Wynter’s theory in order to experiment with a posthuman(ist) approach that does not reduce all language to a privileged marker of the human proper for Western liberalism, but instead accounts for the multiplicity of human-language assemblage in relation to the differential status on the claims of humanity. While Wynter’s imagery of autopoiesis helps us think of human languaging (telling cosmogonies) as a biopolitical event of speciation as racialization, its emphasis on humanness leaves room to further explore the potential for envisioning modes of being human in the more-than-human world (while also acknowledging the tension that decolonial and other critical projects concerning intra-human relations of power impose within posthumanisms).

Building from the onto-epistemological rupture through which the multiple genres of being human become conceivable and advancing the more-than-merely-human perspective that cosmogonic performativity implies in Wynter’s theory, the third part of the article zooms in on how the relationship between human and machine bears upon languaging as performative of being
human. Here, I specifically engage with Rhee’s poetry collection *Robot, Love* (2017) and her installation project *Kimchi Poetry Machine* (debut in 2014). While Sontag identifies the field of literary (as opposed to pragmatic) translation as the fortress of the human distinction from computers, Rhee’s projects engage with poetry as a space for re-envisioning the relationship between human and machine through the prism of difference. In this final part I, therefore, want to further examine how such a re-envisioning opens another horizon of queering and diasporic potentiality of linguistic practice – interweaving the queer genealogy of the ‘thinking machine’ and the fractured affinity among robots, Asians, and Asian migrants throughout colonial history (especially in the US but also in Europe). The association between Asians (and Asian migrants) and machines is especially palpable in the gendered and racialized global division of labour; both are often figured as unappreciated labour that is productive but lacks imagination, creativity, and emotion (the qualities that are supposed to be required for engaging with poetry). This also echoes in anxiety about the loss of jobs for white citizens to AIs and the Asian (woman) migrant labour force (Rhee, 2016) and in the figure of Indian call-centre operators who embody the loss of ethical agency in Sontag’s lecture. In this context, engaging with poetry can also be a decolonial feminist technology for re-envisioning how we become and engage with/in difference, against the biopolitical control and compartmentalization of human and nonhuman populations in the postcolonial capitalist world.

Wynter’s and Rhee’s cybernetic features of languaging invite us to explore the biopolitics of languaging of our time, informing modes of inhabiting and engendering the more-than-human ‘world’ (or the ‘universe’, to borrow from Das), intersecting the relations of species, race, and gender. In this, I hope to develop an ear to listen to what might be called the science of cosmo-poetics – revisiting Césaire’s (1955/2000) notion of ‘science of the Word’ (poetic truth) through Stengers’ (2005) and Latour’s (2004) notion of ‘cosmopolitics’ – as a decolonial and posthuman feminist practice.

**Cosmogonic autopoesis: decolonial and posthuman(ist) performativity**

What could a decolonial approach to human language bring to feminist posthuman(ist) theories, when the latter announced its own arrival with the declaration of ‘the end of the linguistic turn’ (Braidotti, 2006, p. 50)? Barad (2003) appeals to a departure from the linguistic turn in order to overcome representationalism, which Barad sees as a by-product of the Cartesian division between the knowing subject and the world outside this subject (p. 806). However, Barad is keen to note the common conflation between ‘linguistic monism’, which often refers broadly to structuralist and poststructuralist theories, and theories of performativity: ‘Performativity is actually a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve’ (p. 802). For Barad (2003), the problem in existing theories of performativity is not their recourse to representationalism but the exclusive focus on *human-based* discursive practices and bodies (pp. 810–826). In response, Barad (2003) proposes a posthumanist theory of performativity that ‘incorporates important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors’ (p. 808). While Barad’s posthumanist theory salvages the concept of performativity from alleged representationalism, my main critique is that it nonetheless also leaves unexamined the connection between human-based linguistic practices and representationalism (and linguistic monism). Hence, Barad’s theory fails to address that what constitutes *human*-based linguistic practice (and human-based bodies) is already a political question, given the differential speaking-subjects’ positions in relation to knowledge and to the contested boundary of non/humanity in the colonial and postcolonial world. As such, Barad’s diagnosis that ‘language has been granted too much power’ unwittingly omits the question of whose/which language has been privileged as *human* discourse (itself contingent on the racial and geopolitical intrahuman hierarchy), and thereby precludes the possibility for (human) linguistic practices to engage with the world otherwise. In this light, I propose a theory of posthuman
performativity that is, rather paradoxically, open to the multiplicity of human-language-world assemblages alongside the axes of speciation and racialization across the globe.

This necessity for interlocution between decolonialist criticism and posthumanisms leads me to Wynter’s theory of *homo narrans*, which is presented in the unpublished essay ‘Human Being as Noun? Or Being Human as Praxis?’ (2007), and elaborated further in her conversation with McKittrick titled ‘Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?’ (2015). For Wynter & McKittrick (2015), paying attention to human linguistic practice (of telling cosmogonies) is far from a claim on logocentric human exceptionalism, but rather a key for understanding ‘the question of who we are as humans’ as a decolonialist agenda (p. 62). The political significance of this question parallels the planetary catastrophe problematically called the ‘Anthropocene’ – a term that presumes the ‘Western bourgeois’ model of Man as the representative of all human kinds (Anthropos). Given that the catastrophe is caused by the Western (and Westernized) middle class’ modes of material provisioning (capitalism) but that its destructive cost is unequally imposed on poorer and darker peoples and regions, calling it the result of ‘human activities’ reinstitutes rather than deters the specific modes of being human that are in fact culpable (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, pp. 21–22). If the Anthropocene is only a synecdoche for the even more extensive planetary catastrophe that the model of Man has led us to; then, it is necessary to challenge the overrepresentation of humans by Man and rediscover other kinds of humanity and modes of being human in order to re-envision a futurity other than what the impending catastrophe presents.

In this light, Wynter offers an alternative story of human evolution as a way to re-envision who we are as humans. Following what she calls – in reference to chemist Ilya Prigogine’s law-event duality – the ‘First Event’ (the origin of the universe) and the ‘Second Event’ (the explosion of biological life-forms), there came the ‘Third Event’ marking the origin of the human as a storytelling species, *homo narrans*, which can be traced back to Africa (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, p. 31). Wynter attributes the Third Event to ‘the co-evolution of the human brain with … the emergent faculties of language’ (p. 25). Wynter’s proposition is that thanks to the human brain’s capacity to neuro-chemically ‘auto-institute’ itself in response to the symbolic instructions given by the origin stories of our societies, we (have) become *the very kinds of humans* that our cosmogonies say we are (p. 25). However, the multiplicity of ‘genres of being human’, each performatively generated by its own origin story, has (so far) been blotted out by the globally hegemonic figure of Man (p. 21). And, of course, this Western model of Man is also simply an enactment of its own origin stories among many others, first invented as Renaissance intelligentsia’s *homo politicus* and now succeeded by the Western bourgeois’ liberal humanist reinvention of *homo oeconomicus* (p. 35).

Wynter & McKittrick’s (2015) theory finds the origin of the human-as-species in the evolutionary articulation between biology and language (brain and myth), which she calls ‘the autopoiesis of being hybridly human’ in reference to Chilean second-order cybernetics theorists Maturana and Varela’s term (p. 27). Notably, Wynter illustrates this cybernetic hybridity by revisiting Frantz Fanon’s famous moment when he was called a ‘dirty nigger’ upon arriving in imperial France (p. 56). In this scene, Wynter writes, the black person’s physiogeny/ontogeny (black skin) is instituted as such by the projected gaze of the colonialist sociogeny (white mask), which is the Darwinian myth that regards the Black as a naturally deselected savage (p. 56). Wynter further suggests that this event – during which Fanon’s dermal condition turns into a mode of being Black in the metropolitan environment – inaugurates the colonial subject, who must experience being both ‘normally and abnormally human’ (p. 56). The irreconcilable conflict between normal and abnormal humanity not only poses the colonial subject as a pseudo-species but also institutes the (normal) human species. Wynter’s theory of *homo narrans* tells of both the beginning of the human species in Africa during the Third Event and the beginning of the colonial subject in the middle of the twentieth century in Fanon – mirroring the double structure of Darwin’s theory on the origin of the human, which effectively inaugurates the West’s Man. As such, while Wynter’s theory recasts the Darwinian origin story, it does not simply reverse the hegemonic genre of *homo oeconomicus* but rather doubles and haunts it. She therefore not only contests the monopoly of Man but also affords a chimeric vision of
counter-cosmogonies – the retroactive prophecy of our past that is not yet, which performatively undo/does who we have become and further who we will have become as humans.

Portraying cosmogony-mediated human evolution through the concept of autopoiesis, Wynter’s somewhat eccentric refiguration of the human species as cybernetic in origin invites an interesting conversation with posthumanisms. On one hand, Wynter & McKittrick’s (2015) theory of homo narrans seems to repeat the anthropocentric habit of privileging language as what distinguishes the human species from ‘all other primates’ (p. 25). On the other, and probably at odds with Wynter’s own intention, her theory also entails a potentially posthuman hypothesis of how cosmogonic codes are literally written into human brains and substantialized through the evolutionary process. Or rather, as a critique of the kind of monohumanism that has led to the impending planetary environmental destruction, Wynter’s theory is itself predisposed to a kind of revision such as Hantel’s (2018) proposition that ‘autopoiesis is multispecies’ (p. 73). Hantel (2018) notes that while Wynter draws upon cybernetic theories, which are often discussed in terms of a human-machine interface, these nonetheless emerged in relation to research in animals such as Gregory Bateson’s search for the patterns of communication among all living creatures (p. 77). Still, this ‘multispecies’ autopoiesis is also racially and geopolitically constituted, as suggested by Bateson’s research involving ethnographic observations on colonial Balinese people, whose bodily gestures inform the stability and disruption of the system – which conveniently exempts the anthropologist from paying attention to (let alone learning) the native language (Halpern, 2012).

Here, the point is not that Wynter’s theory is (or is not) sufficiently posthuman. Rather, what I want to stress as important is that Wynter’s cybernetic approach to human evolution through systematic interaction between the biological and the linguistic amplifies the decolonial tension within posthuman(ism) due to its relation to the Other outside and also within the boundary of the human/Man. Further, I argue that such tension is not necessarily negative, but rather is a quintessential condition for thinking about linguistic performativity as non-representational becoming human only in difference – in other words, only in relation to other races and/as other species. In this light, Wynter’s focus on language that makes thinkable the multiplicity of genres of being human (alongside and against the overrepresentation of the West’s Man) can be considered an important detour for rethinking linguistic performativity in relation to the more-than-merely-human world. Then, to take up where Wynter has left off in exploring the performativity of ‘cosmogonies’ (rather than ‘human origin stories’), languaging alongside nonhuman entities and inhuman forces that constitute a cosmos might be another step towards re-envisioning a futurity alternative to the script of the planetary catastrophe.

Poetry and/as technology of difference

The next part of this article further explores the posthumanist vision for different genres of being human in the more-than-merely-human world, proceeding from my reading of Wynter’s theory of homo narrans. In this light, this section engages with Rhee’s poetry collection Love, Robot (2017) and her poetry installation project Kimchi Poetry Machine (debut 2014), focusing on how reimagining the relationship between poetry and machine opens another horizon of queer and diasporic modes of encountering both the human and the more-than-human world. In this, I aim to offer a decolonial and posthuman feminist glimpse at how Wynterian autopoiesis of being human (as racialization) is already a praxis of being/becoming human in relation to others (here, robots and machines).

Playing with the relationship between human and machine as both the form and the content of poetry, Rhee offers a fruitful space for me to re-envision the biopolitics of languaging from two perspectives. First, this part challenges the tradition of claiming poetry as the hallmark of human distinctiveness (as in Sontag’s lecture on literary translation), in conversation with posthumanist critiques on the use of the machine poetry as a touchstone for measuring the humanlike-ness of artificial intelligence (Beals, 2018; Winder, 2004). However, my focus is on the biopolitical valence of
the human/machine distinction, considering how robots and machines are often associated with certain groups of people who thereby mark the margins of humanity.

In this light, on one hand, I would like to read Rhee against the backdrop of the fractured affinity between robots and Asians and Asian Americans (as hard-working yet uninspiring labourers). As such, my reading is a postcolonial feminist effort to make conceivable another possibility in relation to the oppressive structure of what Wendy Chun has criticized as the construction of the human ‘through jettisoning of the Asian/American other as robotic, as machine-like and not quite human, as not quite lived’, especially in the US (Chun, 2011, p. 51; recited from; Rhee, 2016). On the other hand, I attend to how Rhee’s poetry recasts two qualities that are often considered unsuitable for machines – love and poetry – playing with the queer genealogy of AI and especially with Turing (1950), the British mathematician known both for his pioneering vision in artificial intelligence and for his homosexuality.

In this, I draw upon queer approaches to love as political concept and practice, in order to engage with difference outside the logic of identity and sameness. Rhee’s work invites us to engage with poetry not as the site of human distinction from a machine but as a machinery of becoming (human) in difference – at the intersections of race, sexuality, and species in the cybernetic fold.

Second, my reading of Rhee’s poetry is informed by a decolonial tradition that, following Césaire (1990), posits poetry (and poetics) as an antidote to the monopoly of scientific knowledge since European colonialism. Césaire argues that poetry brings ‘humanity back in the universal concert, unites the human flowering with universal flowering’ (1990, p. xiii), as ‘all true poetry, without ever abandoning its humanity, at the moment of greatest mystery ceases to be strictly human so as to begin to be truly cosmic’ (1990, p. xiv). If we think of this power of poetic truth through the onto-epistemology that Wynter’s theory suggests (languaging as racializing/speciating), then what genres of being human in the universal flowering can true poetry bloom? Is this a gesture towards the Wynterian autopoietic overturn, with the chimeric vision coming from the margins of humanity near the robots and machines?

**Love, Robot: can machines love?**

I propose to consider the question, ‘Can machines think?’

— Alan Turing, ‘Computating Machinery and Intelligence’ (1950)

In playful response to Turing question, Rhee’s poetry collection *Love, Robot* (2017) prompts another: ‘Can machines love?’ (Thorburn, 2016). Shifting focus from cognitive to emotional capacity, this question challenges human-exceptionalist logocentrism but at the same time implies that ‘emotional intelligence’ is the ultimate benchmark for human uniqueness. However, intimating Turing’s then-prohibited homosexuality (and its implication in the genealogy of artificial intelligence), this question also slips away from its own underlying logic of sameness (i.e. the equivalence between human and robot) and into the question of what it even means that someone or something ‘can’ love. On this slippery ground, Rhee’s poetry invites us to inhabit a world where humans and robots fall in (and out of) love with each other and to envision a mundane yet transgressive intimacy between different corporealties – disturbing the ‘biopolitical sphere’ of intimacy imbricated within the racial and species order of things (Chen, 2012, p. 3).

[...]

There,
Between
Turk street and 7th
i stroked your shoulder
your lights began to beam and
you stayed put,
as the cars passed
us, and the traffic lights
In the final lines of 'BEAM, ROBOT', the first poem in Robot, Love, the cityscape where ‘the traffic lights eventually all turned red’ opens a time-space for robot-love-poetry. While red light is often applied to machines to signal ‘rupture’ and ‘danger’ due to its ‘primordial vividness’ (Manely & Ronda, 2013, p. 24), in this poem it not only alarms and interrupts but also allures: the human and robot lovers ‘lit up with the pin ball machine’, dazzling and being dazzled by each other ('BEAM, ROBOT'). While there’s nothing new about red love, electric red in Rhee’s poems illuminates a queer ‘ecology of sensation’ (Rai, 2012, p. 111) in which humans are wired into robots through desire and intimacy. Or, perhaps it is the queer ecology of sensation that flickers red, signalling transgressive biopolitics of love across corporeal differences. The sensation of human-robot intimacy beams, blinks, and sparks in electric dryness as the robot partner gets close to is touched by, and jolts against the wet-sanguine human partner.

Similarly, in ‘LOVE, ROBOT’ Rhee describes how ‘the soft part of my fingers’ touches a robot lover to ‘make her blink red’. This poem begins with the (human?) narrator pausing to ‘watch you shower because you closed your eyes in the water and slightly parted your mouth’, envious of the aliveness in this mundane scene. Yet, it ends with the narrator’s disastrous attempts to make the robot alive: ‘i coaxed my robot not to be afraid of the water. To open her mouth. To let everything rinse away by the sparks of electric light’ ('LOVE, ROBOT'). This spark marks the unassimilability between the two different kinds of corporeality, unsettling seemingly all-too-human songs about humans and machines being fascinated by, making love to, feeling frustrated with, and being heartbroken by one another.

If Rhee’s poems demand a certain naïveté to enable an enchanting and enchanted look at both robots and humans, they do so through the prism of difference rather than of the sameness of Man. In other words, this poetic naïveté does not prove machines’ (human-like) capacity to love, or even humans’ capacity to love machines (as if they were humans); it instead operates something like what Bennett (2004) describes as ‘a clue to the secret life of nonhumans’ that resists human comprehension (p. 358). Yet, even in such poetic speculation, the difference between human and robots is sustained, as the enchanted intimacy, desire, and sensation between robot and human lovers is interwoveed with the memory of prohibited homosexuality:

you held me close even when i didn’t want you to, even though everyone stared at us.  
. . . . when we are together, they stare at us. let’s be careful. hide me deep & order me oil, coke, & springs. don’t let anyone see us. i want us to live a long life together. i want to have your cyborg baby, i want to share a coke with you, every year, on the same day, in our near future. 
cut off my legs & head, leave only my servomotor 
we dance on tables we drink 
until we die 
cables, 
connectors 
wires 
water, & 
flesh 
[. . .] 
dear mother did you make me? 
(Rhee, 2017, ‘MACHINE TESTIMONIAL 6’)

In this passage, human-robot love is coded through a clandestine love of homosexuality, referencing Frank O’Hara’s ‘Having a Coke with You’. As Muñoz (2009) describes, in O’Hara’s poem the ‘quotidian act’ of having a Coke with somebody ‘signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality’ (p. 6). Evoking having a Coke as a quotidian yet encrypted intimacy in O’Hara, the seemingly normative desires for living ‘a long life together’ and having a (cyborg) baby also evoke transgressive intimacy and kinship. The species difference keeps human-robot love from
being simply analogous to a human heterosexual relationship, and the reader is left perplexed whether ‘cut off my legs & head’ is violent or humorous. In this way, the poetry queers human-robot love, challenging the conventional trope of intimacy between human and robot that often figures (female) robots as both the creature and object of patriarchal and masculine desire.

‘When all the traffic lights turn red’ is when human-robot love begins but also ends. Perhaps this love belongs to the night, which dwell in this suspended time. The night is the time of being-nearby and its difficulty, with and despite difference. In ‘SLEEP, ROBOT’, while robots ‘take time for day dreaming’ at night, the narrator falls asleep next to her partner because ‘there is no sweeter lullaby than the hum of your servomotor’ (Rhee, 2017). However, as the robot grows slower and rustier, and eventually needs to be fixed (or ‘maybe even replaced’), it asks, ‘I may stop in the middle of the night/ never see you again./so, stay up with me … ’ And the human is receptive: ‘i tried to stay up/i did everything to try, yet my eyes fluttered shut long before/all your lights died into a/dead city./deep cough of night’ (Rhee, 2017). As the human narrator desperately attempts to stay awake with the robot and later to fix it in ‘a sea of plentiful oil, screws, and gears’, the poem envisions a romantic intimacy with an entity embodying a different kind of corporeal ephemerality (such as daily biological rhythm and product life-cycle) that does not resort to anthropocentric mortality. This difference suggests both the possibility and the impossibility of human-robot intimacy, or rather that the near-im possibility of being One (occupying the same time-space) is the very content that opens the possibility of intimacy, which does not completely assimilate the difference of robots into the biopolitical realm of the human. Thus, it is even more transgressive when the human lover is left alone, lonely again.

So, Rhee’s question ‘Can machines love?’ is a clever trick after all. As the poetry unfolds, the problem is less the robot’s capacity to love than the human-centric and normative assumptions coded into the structure of the sentence itself. Rhee’s poetry turns away from the concept of ‘love’ as an emotional capacity attributed to the human and from the ingrained logic of the sameness of Man that dictates desirable love objects and subjects within the biopolitical order of things. Instead, the poetry turns love into a limit concept that demarcates and crosses such logic and order, through which each species becomes with and is undone by each other.

As such, if we consider linguistic performativity alongside Wynterian genres of being human (or the biopolitical event of languaging as racializing/speciating), then Rhee’s Robot, Love affords a glimpse at a poetic event of being/becoming human, done and undone in (and out of) love with machines. Of course, in Rhee’s poetry (and my reading of it so far), it isn’t clear what it bears upon race or racialization, and I don’t want to say that Robot, Love is about race (even metaphorically). Nonetheless, my reading offers a posthumanist revision of Wynter’s approach to linguistic performativity without overwriting its racial implication, in a couple of different senses. The concept of being/becoming human in difference helps us to think of Wynter’s proposition about the multiplicity of genres of human beings, beyond the notion of race as an already-defined category of identity and the West’s Man as its reference point. Furthermore, the racial implication becomes clearer if we read the poetry against Sontag’s lecture, in which the privileging of human languaging (especially literary translation) over computer calculation implicates inhumanizing racialized (especially Indian) labourers. In this light, the poetic event of being/becoming human in love with robots in Rhee recasts a racialized genre of being human near machines both inside and outside the global cybernetic fold.

The Kimchi Poetry Machine: what poems do you hear from machines?

Q: Please write me a sonnet on the subject of the Forth Bridge.
A: Count me out on this one, I could never write poetry.
~ Alan Turing, ‘Computating Machinery and Intelligence’ (1950)

As the imaginary scenario in an imitation game suggests, writing poetry has been considered a touchstone for testing the uniqueness of human intelligence with emotional and creative capacity (as opposed to simply mechanical intelligence), even though only a small fraction of humans might
be more confident about their capacity than Turing’s imaginary machine. Instead of asking simplywhether machines can write poetry, Margaret Rhee’s multimedia installation *The Kimchi Poetry Machine* adds a twist by asking a question that concerns the human capacity to engage with difference: ‘What poems do you hear from machines?’ Engaging with *The Kimchi Poetry Machine*, in this final part of my article I explore listening to poetry as a feminist and diasporic technology of becoming in the cybernetic circuits of poetry, labour, and love – offering a counter-vision to the prevalent association between Asian migrants and machines. In this way, I also recompose Wynter’s theory on the cosmogonic autoinstitution of genres of being human as posthuman and cyborgian in Donna Haraway’s (1991) sense, expanding the cybernetic figure (auto-poiesis) in her theory to transnational cybernetic and cyborgian connections.

*The Kimchi Poetry Machine* was created to reimagine ‘how poetry can be written, listened to, and interacted with in the near future’ in response to a call for a digital-bookless library (Rhee, n.d). As such, it involves futuristic technology of robotics and cybernetics, but at the same time is also tactile and sensual. To engage with *The Kimchi Poetry Machine*, you must first open a ‘kimchi jar’, a kind of preservative glassware often used for containing kimchi in groceries in the US and other countries. When the jar is opened, to borrow Rhee’s words, ‘instead of pungent smells of fermented cabbage filling your nose, your eardrums are lulled by the luminous readings of poetry’ (Rhee, n.d). You are also invited to take one of the small article pieces of feminist poems inside the jar, written on issues of ‘womanhood, culture, and kimchi’ by invited poetas, and then to tweet them (twitter handle @kimchipomachine) (Rhee, n.d). In this way, you are wired into the cybernetic circuit of human-kimchi jar-Twitter as you engage with the poems singing about affection, labour, and sense of belonging and displacement among and beyond Korean and Korean American women. In this way, Kimchi Poetry Machine turns the connection between Asians (especially Asian women) and information technology (which often marks the status of their labour in the global labour market) into the condition for another genre of being human – for networking, creating, and sharing in the cybernetic matrix of poetry. The following is a poem from the first batch out of the machine:

Bright red – grandma’s gochugaru in mom’s cucumber kimchi.
Aia! My son just bit me with his first fresh-cut tooth. How sweetly it burns.
(Hyejung Kook)

In Hyejung Kook’s poem, the bright red colour of kimchi from chilli pepper evokes the Korean diasporic matrilineal heritage of material and affective reproductive labour. Traditionally, making kimchi (*kimchang*) has been a major event undertaken by a group of women in the family, often with help from neighbours. While this kind of large-scale group kimchi-making is now less common, Koreans (especially women) often share the essential chilli pepper (*gochugaru*) for making kimchi with their children and relatives in Korea and Korean diasporic communities. The collective work of creating, circulating, and listening to the poem (like making, sharing, and eating kimchi) features a cybernetic diasporic feminist poetics that spins out creative and loving activity from the mundane reproductive labour often done by women. However, if *The Kimchi Poetry Machine* operates as a gendering-racializing technology, it does so less by tying kimchi back to Korean/Asian identity than by mobilizing affinities across differences.

Poetry as a technology of becoming in difference unfolds in a queering force in the immersive experience of a demo video for *The Kimchi Poetry Machine* titled ‘Red Bloom: Poetry Altar for Queens’ (Rhee, 2015). In this video, micha cárdenas is listening to a poem from the machine that happens to be the one they themself contributed:

At the Prince, over soju and kimchi,
she weaved pop lyrics into queer
genealogies, geographies, and familias,
ever breaking the electronic
90s rhythm
(micha cárdenas)
In this poetry event, the aural experience of listening to the poem is intensified by the sensation of red, choreographing encounters among various elements – first kimchi and kimchi-inspired poems, then the artificial-red machine and alter, in front of which micha cárdenas’s trans* body is sitting in a red dress, provoking feminine lust and sexuality as indicated by the title ‘Red Bloom’. If I go a bit further, there is also Prince, a bar in Koreatown in Los Angeles, furnished with red-ish couches under dim light. What emerges through this choreography is not a unification of components but a border-crossing becoming – fuelled by Korean-diasporic memories, spine, liquor, outdated music, and a bar in L.A. Listening to the poem, cárdenas becomes (Asian) diaspora with the poetry machine (no longer the same as the one who wrote the poem or even the one who read it aloud), and in this the poetry event also queers not only through cárdenas’ visual and sonic presence (which unsettles the binary gender categories) but also through her linking of the Korean bar with memories of queer sociality.

To sum up, in this final part of the article I explored how human linguistic performativity as an auto-institution of genres of being human is also a more-than-merely-human event in Rhee’s two poetry works, in order to better address the biopolitical climate at the planetary level and to search for an alternative vision – recasting the relationship between poetry (often considered the human linguistic-affective capacity par excellence) and machine/robots. Rhee’s two poetry works illustrate how poetics might enact different modes of being/becoming human, as one is done, undone by, and wired with machines through love in difference. As such, her poetry offers a glimpse of a posthuman version of chimeric vision that emerges from the onto-epistemological rupture on the edge of the humanity: a cosmo-poetic vision of how we encounter the world in which we live, work, and love. This vision is set against the prevalent biopolitical tropes associating Asians and Asian migrants with machines, which reiterates the global division of labour through which both groups are controlled and depreciated as a redundant yet threatening population in a world marked by advanced IT, capitalism, and global mobility.

Coda: an exercise for listening to cosmo-poetics

In critical conversation with the posthuman(ist) critique on linguistic centrism (which tends to turn away from human-based linguistic practice) and the decolonial critique on West-centric monolinguism (which leaves room for the more-than-human perspective), this article has explored languaging as a biopolitical site where the difference across race, gender, and species is articulated, enacted, and re-envisioned in the global circuits of cybernetics and information technology. In this, I have engaged with Wynter’s retrospective prophecy (by re-telling the past) alongside Rhee’s futuristic world-building in poetry, in search of a decolonial feminist approach to techno-linguistic performativity as a mode of being and becoming with and through the world.

This search turns out to be a kind of exercise for cultivating an ear to listen to what I call cosmo-poetics, bringing together the new science of words (poetics) as decolonial onto-epistemology with this special issue’s proposal for cosmopolitics as a theoretical optic for contemporary biopolitics. Cosmo-poetics resists a multiculturalist approach to difference as portrayed in Sontag’s analogy to the Tower of Babel, which underlies her account of ‘the world as India’ (2002). In response to the hierarchical differences among language groups in the world, Sontag urges us to ‘secure and deepen the awareness that other people … really do exist’ – which, for her, reassures the evangelical task of literary translation (which translation machines cannot perform). However, the stakes go well beyond her resolution on the preservation of native accents as a reminder of other people’s existence against the flooding effect of the global language, especially once we think alongside Stengers’ notion of cosmopolitics whose purpose is ‘to slow down the construction of this common world’ (2005, p. 994). Cosmo-poetics calls for attention to unassimilable difference, which emerges from the edge of humanity as the ab/normal humanity of a Black man in Fanon or the lullaby of the (clandestine) robot lover.

It is in this context that I searched for the possibility to think the difference (or the Other of thought) within and outside the boundary of the human in Wynter and Rhee. In this sense, this article can also be read as an attempt to find a poetic (re)vision of Haraway’s famous figure of cyborg, which was
modelled after an Asian female in an offshore factory (1991, p. 154, p. 174). However, the goal here is not to reiterate Asian identity to the figure of cyborg or to assume a subversive propensity to be similar to or close to technology. Rather, it is to envision an elsewhere/otherwise by reactivating racialized and gendered difference in the genealogy of feminist and posthumanist theories of cyborg in the contemporary biopolitical landscape, where the modern project of human-as-species enfleshes in and through arranging its sub-races in relation to the transnational network of informational technology. In this light, with my reading of Wynter and Rhee in this article, I propose to think of post human linguistic performativity less as a matter of securing species/racial identity and more as a technology of listening to the difference in a cybernetic fold – that is, as a queer/feminist labour of love.

Notes

1. This is a prevalent theme in the popular imaginary, as in films from Blade Runner (Scott, 1982) to Her (Jonze, 2013) or in recent sex-doll debates concerning whether these dolls might replace the affective interaction that is supposedly quintessential among human partners.

2. When I first saw jars of kimchi on grocery shelves in California in the US as a graduate student, I found it amusing because it is stored differently in Korea; I later learned that kimchi is often stored and sold in this kind of preservative glass jar in many countries in North America and Europe. The use of the kimchi jar as a form and media for mechanical engagement with poetry seems to be another interesting diasporic aspect of this installation (although I am uncertain whether this was Rhee’s intention).

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