

RETHINKING THE GOOD LIFE: A CRIP CRITIQUE OF HON LAI-CHU'S SURREALIST SHORT STORIES

CARISSA MA

mam@fau.edu

Carissa Ma is an Assistant Professor of Anglophone Literature at Florida Atlantic University. Her research focuses on the politics of representation, affect, and emotion in speculative fiction, particularly Asian Futurisms. Her work aims to uncover new avenues of transformation by engaging with the past and envisioning alternative futures. Her scholarship has been published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, *Science Fiction Studies*, *Printing Culture*, *Cultural Studies*, and *Oxford Research in English*.

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Abstract

This *Article* examines the intersection of disruption, disability, and 'post-' concepts in the aftermath of Hong Kong's 2019–2020 protests. Sparked by opposition to the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance amendment, these protests escalated into a broader resistance movement against the erosion of civil liberties, which was eventually suppressed by the National Security Law, a lasting disruption to Hong Kong's sociopolitical landscape. The *Article* investigates how disability metaphors have been co-opted to uphold enforced optimism for Hong Kong's neoliberal developmentalism under this new regime. A curative logic that positions health and stability as prerequisites for progress is used to justify the NSL, producing a 'post-disruption' identity marked by compulsory able-bodiedness and conformity to state norms. Turning to the surrealist short stories of Hong Kong writer Hon Lai-chu, the *Article* explores how narratives of disabled lives critique and disrupt the affective politics of neoliberalism. Interpreted through the lens of crip critique, these stories expose the violent disruptions that challenge the neoliberal promise of progress. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism,' the *Article* argues that post-2019 optimism not only disrupts the lives it seeks to improve but also creates a fractured identity landscape where stability is illusory. This analysis deepens understanding of the ongoing effects of the 2019–2020 protests on Hong Kong's identity and futurity.

1 Introduction

On July 1, 2022, President Xi inaugurated Hong Kong's new Chief Executive, John Lee, marking the 25th anniversary of the territory's return to Chinese rule. The handover was supposed to guarantee autonomy and civil liberties for 50 years, but critics argue these freedoms have diminished since Beijing imposed a national security law in 2020 following mass protests. In recent years, the city's education curriculum has grown increasingly pro-China, and election laws were altered to exclude opposition lawmakers.¹ Press freedom has also been restricted, with the pro-democracy newspaper *Apple Daily* shutting down in June 2021 after arrests of its journalists.² Lee was the sole candidate in an election controlled by an election committee of 1,500 Beijing loyalists.³

'Development' and 'overcoming/restoration' were the key themes of the day. In his keynote address, Xi spoke in detail about the social unrest of the preceding few years. "There is extensive consensus that no time should be lost in Hong Kong's development and that all interference should be removed so that Hong Kong can stay focused on development," Xi added.⁴ In remarks preceding Xi's, Hong Kong's chief executive

John Lee named three significant protests between 2014 and 2019, and said that “the full support of central authorities” contributed to Hong Kong’s ability to *overcome* challenges.⁵ Lee added that the implementation of the National Security Law and electoral system changes were part of Hong Kong restoring “order from chaos.”⁶ Lee highlighted the Belt and Road Initiative—China’s global infrastructure-building program—and the Greater Bay Area plan to integrate Hong Kong with southern mainland cities as initiatives offering vast opportunities, stating, “Development is the gold key to resolving social problems and improving people’s livelihood.”⁷

Hong Kong saw a major exodus, mainly of professionals, following the anti-extradition bill protests in 2019 and the introduction of the National Security Law (NSL) in July 2020. But according to President Xi, “[a]fter the wind and rain,” the city had overcome its challenges and “risen from the ashes.”⁸ Nationalist tabloid *Global Times*, published by the Communist Party’s official *People’s Daily*, wrote triumphantly in an editorial, “The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is irreversible and Hong Kong’s tomorrow will be even brighter.”⁹ The rehabilitative motif of ‘overcoming/restoration’ pervades Xi’s keynote address. The state’s national ideal aligns with able-bodied norms, as Robert McRuer explains through the concept of compulsory able-bodiedness, where “able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all are collectively aiming for.”¹⁰ Xi’s speech emphasizes an active, able-bodied vision, using action verbs to depict Hong Kong’s overcoming of challenges: “After returning to the motherland, Hong Kong has overcome various challenges and is steadily taking steps forward. Whether it’s the international financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, or some intense social unrest, none have stopped the forward momentum of Hong Kong.”¹¹

As a former colony, Hong Kong’s distinct historical context sets it apart from other cities in the PRC, where the quintessential mythologies of modern Chinese history are more readily invoked. In an effort to Sinicize the city’s past and inscribe it within the monolithic aims of China’s patriotic histories as a means of justifying the PRC’s rule of Hong Kong, Xi states, “During the great leap of the Chinese people and nation, from *standing up*, *getting rich*, to *becoming strong*, our Hong Kong compatriots have never been absent. Currently, Hong Kong is in a new phase of transitioning from chaos to order and moving from order to prosperity. The next five years will be a critical period for Hong Kong to create a new situation and achieve *a new leap forward*.”¹² Xi’s speech

is replete with ableist depictions of movement. Movement is registered in able-bodied terms of individual bodily control (i.e. taking steps forward, standing up, etc.), conflating mobility with patriotism and offering a compulsory able-bodied vision of national rejuvenation. Crip theory, which centers the experiences of disabled bodies and the knowledges (or cripistemologies) that emerge from such experiences, disrupts normative understandings of mobility and embodiment by exploring how such bodies are excluded, marginalized, or rendered invisible within dominant narratives. Building on McRuer's insight that compulsory able-bodiedness is deeply intertwined with heteronormativity, crip theory offers a critical framework that both confronts these interconnected systems of oppression and envisions transformative futures where crip and queer possibilities flourish.¹³ In this context, Kateřina Kolářová highlights the importance of crip signing as an invitational approach to analysis, one that opens up continuous possibilities for reimagining how disability is produced, consumed, interpreted, and engaged with.¹⁴ Applying this productive and transgressive framework to Xi's rhetoric and the following analysis, we can ask: Whose bodies and movements are made illegible? In what ways have post-2020 political discourses in Hong Kong usurped, domesticated, or contained those bodies? And how might that domestication or containment be crippled and disrupted?

The intertwined narratives of rehabilitation, focused on 'overcoming crisis or chaos' and 'overcoming disability,' have merged to the extent that being able-bodied is portrayed as a normative citizenship ideal. Consequently, the pursuit of cure and reliance on state intervention are represented as natural and obligatory. The strikingly similar speeches by President Xi and Chief Executive Lee, which both draw comparisons between the containment of dissent and the coronavirus epidemic in Hong Kong, reveal that 'post-disruption' discourses of neoliberal developmentalism under the new national security regime are rich with narratives of rehabilitation, cure, and compulsory able-bodiedness. The transition from the 2019 mass protests—widely portrayed by the state as a descent into chaos, immorality, and irrationality—reflects what McRuer, drawing on Henri-Jacques Stiker, refers to as a "cultural grammar of rehabilitation."¹⁵ This framework operates by framing disruption or deviance as damage in need of repair, positioning the state as the rehabilitative force that must restore order, normativity, and productivity. Within this logic, political dissent is pathologized, and the return to state-sanctioned 'normalcy' is cast as a moral and social

imperative. Xi's and Lee's speeches indicate not only the extent to which the political imaginary of the post-NSL moment has relied upon visions of sickness and malignancy, but also that these visions—as implied by the injunction to overcome and remove 'chaos'—could be deployed as part of a moral appeal for (rehabilitative) transformation. What does the symbolic juxtaposition of dis/ability and the 'chaos' of the 2019 protests mean for the implementation of the draconian National Security Law in Hong Kong? And—perhaps, more importantly—how has this juxtaposition influenced epistemologies of disability and the im/possibility of what Kolářová terms crip horizons? Crip horizons, as discussed here, denote the spaces of resistance and potentiality where marginalized and dis(en)abled experiences are centered, allowing for the exploration of alternative kinds of citizenship and ways of being in the world.

The following discussion traces two lines of argument. First, I reveal how disability metaphors and broader ideological structures of health and compulsory able-bodiedness have been appropriated to enforce optimism for Hong Kong's post-2020 developmentalism under the new national security regime. I argue that a curative logic has been used to legitimize the implementation of the NSL. Second, I look at two surrealist short stories by Hong Kong writer Hon Lai-chu centering dis(en)abled lives to explore the disability positionalities articulated therein. Reading these texts through the lens of crip theory reveals the radical ways in which they speak back to state discourses of ableism and 'happy' development, as well as attest to the experiences of minoritized communities under neoliberal systems of oppression. While Hon's literary works have often been analyzed for their critique of Hong Kong's hypercommodified economy, the critical perspective of disability studies in relation to her works remains underexplored. By utilizing crip and disability frameworks, my intervention remedies the relative absence of disability perspectives in critiques of Hong Kong's hyper-capitalist development. I thereby seek to illuminate the global-scale mechanisms that categorize certain bodies, groups, and populations as 'disposable' or 'expendable' in the service of overarching agendas such as profit, progress, and neoliberal mass consumption.

Highly regarded as a fiction writer and essayist, Hon is known for her surrealist style and incisive prose, delivering lucid portraits of contemporary society and the human psyche. The two short stories that I will discuss, translated from Chinese to English by writer, scholar, and translator Andrea Lingenfelter, are among six short stories compiled

in the anthology *The Kite Family*. This was Hon's first full-length book in English, published by Hong Kong publisher Muse in 2015 in the wake of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, which earned its name from protesters using umbrellas as protection against the police's pepper spray and tear gas. For almost 80 days, from late September to early December in 2014, protestors occupied commercial districts in Hong Kong to demand more transparent elections and genuine universal suffrage.¹⁶ This watershed moment marked the emergence of a mobilized civic consciousness.

While the short stories analyzed here were written before the post-2020 National Security Law (NSL) era, their significance lies in how they anticipate and illuminate broader affective and political shifts that have since intensified. Rather than being historically remote, these texts offer a critical vantage point from which to track the evolving logics of repression and resistance in Hong Kong. By revisiting these stories, written in 2008 but translated and published in English in the wake of the Umbrella Movement, this study foregrounds how earlier narrative forms register anxieties and ethical tensions that remain resonant in the present. These stories capture a moment of fragile possibility—a collective opening toward alternative ways of imagining society, care, and the body—just as that possibility was beginning to be foreclosed.

Speculative fiction, by its very nature, resists linear temporality. Hon's surrealist poetics scramble cause and effect, dislocate time, and stage the breakdown of bodily and social norms—formal strategies that remain powerfully relevant under the NSL regime. Her work critiques compulsory able-bodiedness, cheerful productivity, and developmentalist logics not through direct political allegory but through the oblique intensity of the grotesque, the uncanny, and the absurd. These texts may precede the current era, but they do not predate its conditions. Instead, they make visible the ideological and affective groundwork upon which the state's intensified control has been built. The contrast between the hopefulness of the Umbrella era and the enforced silence of the present moment heightens the stakes of reading these earlier texts today. By asking, “How do the state's normative prescriptions of compulsory able-bodiedness and ‘happy’ development intersect with this transformation?” this *Article* argues that the pre- and post-NSL moments are deeply entwined and that fiction written before 2020 continues to offer vital tools for interrogating the contours of power, vulnerability, and dissent in Hong Kong today.

2_Cruel Optimism and Cripistemological Perspectives

The semantics of rehabilitation bequeaths us a language propelled by promises: promises of health, normalcy, functionality, and prosperity—all that seems to be encapsulated by the promise of the NSL and of neoliberal developmentalism in Hong Kong. Yet, as Berlant asserts, some promises are cruel. Berlant cautions, “[w]here cruel optimism operates, the very vitalising or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place.”¹⁷ As my analysis will demonstrate, the post-2020 triumphalism in official rhetoric appeals to the form of affectivity that Berlant defines as ‘cruel optimism,’ a relation in which “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”¹⁸ Optimism becomes cruel specifically “when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving.”¹⁹ The cruel optimism of the post-2020 moment in Hong Kong, I propose, forecloses the possibility of crip epistemologies, reflecting a chilling pattern of authoritarian governance that prioritizes control and conformity over freedom and plurality. Under the NSL, when (compulsory) patriotism appears defined by the compulsory affects of curative positivity, cripness is an impossible location; it is unintelligible and lies beyond the conceivable, thinkable, and imaginable political horizon.

Affective publics are interconnected networks that form and shift based on shared emotional expressions, where individuals are brought together, identified, and possibly excluded through the display of sentiment.²⁰ In Hong Kong, the price for gaining social belonging and being symbolically (self-)included into the affective public is, in a cruel paradox, the impossibility of expressing any political demands that would expose the violence of the national security regime. This regime of violence threatens to assimilate and reorient noncompliant populations into the productive flow of the nation and nationalized aspirations for property and wealth. Given the paradoxical cost of belonging and the silencing of political expression, it becomes crucial to consider alternative avenues where marginalized voices can assert their agency. In this context, contemporary fiction, particularly from Hong Kong, serves as a conduit for affective expression, opening up space for these populations to tell their stories on their own terms. I want to ask what Hong Kong contemporary speculative fiction offers to critiques of neoliberalism—more specifically, to critiques formulated from

cripistemological perspectives and which we might perceive as reorientations toward crip futures. In engaging with this question, I draw further upon Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, which has been helpful as I identify forms and scenes of attachment that make available promises of better futures. These attachments form the ideological foundation of Hong Kong's 'post-disruption' recovery narrative, which frames the city's alleged shift 'from chaos to order.' Kolářová offers the metaphor of "the inarticulate crip"²¹ that gestures toward a horizon transgressing the normatively progressive futurity of straight and abled time (of rehabilitation, restoration, and cure). As I will go on to argue, the inarticulate crips that figure in Hon Lai-chu's short stories allow us to revisit and complicate the past to forge different versions of desires for alternative futures defiant of compulsory positivity and optimism.

The enactment of NSL in Hong Kong represents a significant disruption, reshaping the city's political and social landscape. As Lars Koch and Tobias Nanz note, "disruptions are by no means solely destructive but rather productive consequences [...] which provoke critical reflections."²² The NSL not only imposes sweeping measures, such as criminalizing acts of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces, but also establishes a state-appointed security apparatus to oversee and enforce its provisions. The law therefore marks a shift from the previous semi-autonomous governance model, heralding a new order. This 'post-disruption' phase is framed by the Hong Kong government as a transition 'from chaos to order,' positioning the law as a stabilizing force that restores national security and societal harmony. Such a narrative of compulsory positivity and optimism hinges on a particular chronology of destructive and productive processes, emphasizing the productive consequences of the law in bringing stability while also reflecting on the instability that preceded it. This shift towards a 'post-disruption' order, while framed as a restoration of stability and security, also creates a new framework for understanding citizenship and belonging in Hong Kong. The transition under the NSL thus not only reconfigures the political landscape but also reshapes affective ties to the state.

Hong Kong's transition under the NSL has produced forms of affective citizenship based on what Berlant calls "aspirational normativity."²³ In the post-NSL context, the aspiration promising the utopia of the 'good life,' or the moral aspiration of the post-NSL transition, is by definition that of rehabilitation—overcoming the alleged failure and shame of the 'bad' past. The cruelty of the post-NSL moment lies—as I hope my

analysis above unmask—in conditioning forms of social belonging through discourses of overcoming and fantasies of cure. The PRC-mandated aspiration of the post-NSL transition is progress, moral emancipation, and eventual happiness. Yet, as Sara Ahmed cautions, happiness is a troubled notion. She asks, “What are we consenting to, when we consent to happiness?” and offers us a troubling answer: “perhaps the consensus that happiness is the consensus.”²⁴ Ahmed’s questioning of happiness as the normative horizon of our orientation resonates with the key issues that I address, complementing the analytical framework of ‘cruel optimism.’ Most acutely, Ahmed’s critical discussion focuses on revealing how the vision of and the desire for happiness participate in establishing structures of consensus, which are in fact structures of dominance. The aforementioned state-driven narrative of recovery and progress, epitomized by initiatives like the ‘Happy Hong Kong’ campaign, reflects a broader ideology of development that links stability to personal and collective happiness. However, as we move beyond the framing of national security and economic recovery, it becomes essential to examine how this vision of the ‘good life’ intersects with the realities of marginalized and vulnerable groups in Hong Kong.

In April 2023, the Hong Kong government launched ‘Happy Hong Kong,’ a US\$2.5-million campaign to stimulate local consumption and boost the economy after three years of intermittent COVID-19 lockdowns.²⁵ It was not clear if this campaign was also partly intended to reverse the mass exodus of Hong Kongers that had begun with the Beijing-imposed national security law. The ‘Happy Hong Kong’ campaign is a fitting, if ironic, preface to the questions that I raise in this *Article*: Why do we get hooked on the promise of development? What affective investments keep us attached to it? How does the optimism of the ideology of development betray the very people who, in theory, are supposed to benefit from it? The idea of development continues to inform imaginings of the future, a ‘good life,’ and humanity. At the same time, the developmental fantasy continues to colonize the lives of dis(en)abled and minoritized communities. Despite the official narrative celebrating Hong Kong’s recovery from ‘chaos’ and its subsequent return to prosperity, certain marginalized groups have been left behind, particularly those dealing with mental health challenges. While some mental health patients simply slipped through the cracks during the COVID-19 pandemic, others, such as students with special education needs, saw their conditions worsen to a point of irreversibility, as highlighted by the seasoned Hong Kong

psychiatrist Willy Wong.²⁶ The pandemic not only affected the accessibility of mental health services, with hospitals accepting fewer psychiatric non-emergency cases. It also hit the city economically, socially, and emotionally, leading to something of a mental health crisis in the city.

A mall attack in June 2023 by a man with schizophrenia sparked public concern over mental health in Hong Kong. While the health authority called it “an isolated event without any [warning] sign,”²⁷ psychiatrist Eric Chen disagreed, using a tsunami metaphor to highlight systemic issues: “Why didn’t [the Observatory] give a warning? [...] If the equipment was not performing as it should, it was not an isolated event.”²⁸ Hong Kong’s mental health services are critically understaffed, with psychiatrists in the public system each handling an average of 761 patients, well above the World Health Organization’s recommended 700.²⁹ While doling out cash giveaways and tax breaks, the Hong Kong government has failed to address the mental health crisis. What the administration thinks is a catchy subtitle for the 2023–24 budget—‘Leaping Forward Steadily, Together We Bolster Prosperity Under Our New Vision’—raises questions: What is this vision? Who is ‘we’? Does ‘we’ include the poor, ethnic minorities, domestic workers, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ individuals in Hong Kong?

Studying present-day Hong Kong under the NSL through cripistemological perspectives helps us examine the effects of developmental policies and practices on the lives of dis(en)abled people and communities. It is clear that disability is “interarticulated”³⁰ with other categories that hierarchically organize notions of human worth. These inter-articulations are key to understanding modern development and coloniality past and present. Disability needs to be recognized as a central power differential, especially in Hong Kong, where disability is severely underdiscussed. Most importantly, I demonstrate how overlooking disability in the intersectional equation reinforces persistent epistemic coloniality. By ignoring the significance of disability, we undermine the critique of much current post- and de-colonial work. Crip criticism of the notion of development focuses on disability as an axis of power that is frequently omitted from critiques of coloniality/modernity but is central to their workings. It seeks to show how the rationale of development is often upheld through disability and its interarticulations with the ways precarious, disenfranchised, and

dispossessed people in particular are made to pay the price for promises of future development.

3_“Forrest Woods, Chair”

“Forrest Woods, Chair” is a strange yet moving tale in which Forrest Woods, who is unemployed—a status that brings shame on him and his family—finds solace through becoming an inanimate object, namely a chair. Clearly drawing on Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* for inspiration, Hon grounds her narrative in the forces bearing down on individual lives in Hong Kong: family pressure to succeed, high living costs, mechanization of work, and neoliberal capitalism. The ‘decorporealization’ of a human body from flesh to an inanimate object is linked by Hon to environmental deterioration, rising unemployment, and personal financial predicament. Hon’s non-realist depiction of a man turning into a chair challenges ableist views of disability. By departing from realism, it avoids stereotypes tied to real-world disabilities, prompting readers to understand the protagonist’s condition on its own terms.

Forrest Woods is so dedicated to and inseparable from his chair work—being a chair for hire—that he ultimately transforms into an actual chair and is sold off with other chairs to another country. Woods’s fate as a human chair enacts the myth of the “ideal worker,”³¹ who is so devoted to work that he attends to his job ahead of all else, even his own health. The potential untenability of this material-discursive position is managed through the internalization of norms, desires, and assessments of value that instantiate this way of being. Mrs. Woods, upon finding out that her son has been sold off as a chair, comforts herself by saying, “He may never come back, but what does it matter? After all, *he loves his work*.”³² The construction and perpetuation of the ideal worker archetype in contemporary capitalism are deeply ingrained in societal norms, desires, and assessments of value. Forrest Woods, in his embodiment as a human chair, emerges as a product of this capitalist apparatus, embodying the extreme consequences of unrestrained devotion to work.

Hon’s protagonists are outcasts due to their inability to contribute materially to society. The short story “Forrest Woods, Chair” appears to dramatize how the body is commodified by capitalist processes. Colin Williams’ commodification thesis suggests that profit-driven exchanges are currently expanding while non-commodified practices are shrinking.³³ Similarly, Bruce Carruthers and Sarah Babb note the “near-complete

penetration of market relations into our modern economic lives.”³⁴ Capitalism reduces human activity to economic value, leading to the alienation and marginalization of those who cannot fit into its profit-driven framework. Commodified work is composed firstly of goods and services produced for exchange; secondly of monetized exchange; and thirdly of monetized exchange for the purpose of profit. If any of these constituent components are missing, then an economic practice cannot be described as truly commodified. Woods’s renting himself out as a chair can therefore be potentially interpreted as a form of non-commodified work where monetized transactions indeed take place, but the profit-motive is wholly absent.

The commodity that Woods produces (namely himself as a chair) is not merely a means to making a profit. Undoubtedly, Forrest Woods’s laboring body does come to acquire a price and a monetary form—“an hourly fee for chair services.”³⁵ But the “process by which everything becomes a commodity”³⁶ is by no means complete in this case. By pretending to be a chair for profit, Forrest Woods realizes that capitalism’s discipline of his productivity and of his body can be satisfied by this transactional performance. For Woods, this constitutes a form of liberation, albeit in a profoundly ironic sense; he needs only perform for society—assuming “the demeanor of a loyal chair”³⁷ and “summon[ing] up the cool and dispassionate response of a chair.”³⁸ By contrast, Woods’s brother Rich is an authentic member, a successful businessman who always dons “a sober-colored suit”.³⁹ When Woods performs the role of an inanimate object, he is distracted from the disconcerting fact of his own unemployment status: “everything finally calm[s] down”⁴⁰ and he “savor[s] the happiness of being a chair.”⁴¹

Through the deeply ambivalent nature of Forrest’s chair work, the short story seems to suggest a need to subject the status quo of commodification to greater critical scrutiny. Following Williams, Hon’s short story may be urging us to free our imaginations from the restrictive, deterministic view of a commodified world, particularly regarding the future of work. By doing so, it invites us to envision alternatives to commodified work relations and different development paths to those currently perceived as inevitable. As I will go on to demonstrate, Hon’s short story achieves this by highlighting the importance of crip signing, which is proposed by Kolářová as an invitational mode of analysis that always gestures toward other possibilities for producing, consuming, reading, and interacting with disability representation.

The protagonist's metamorphosis is characterized by a productive ambivalence. While it may be viewed as a survival strategy rather than a deliberate rejection of capitalist norms, the eventual transformation of the protagonist into the most mundane of objects might also offer an invitation for crip signing. Crip signing is a stratagem for reading culture (and cultural texts) against the grain for the purpose of crafting alternative futures.⁴² It functions as "a critical gesture toward something that is not fully articulated, something that cannot be expressed in the language of identity and political pragmatism."⁴³ In Hon's short story, this gesture takes shape through a profound resistance to ideological constructs of health, able-bodied longevity, and the compulsorily optimistic narratives of cure. Rather than aspiring to restoration or normalization, crip signing paradoxically crafts survival from within abjection, transforming vulnerability into a site of critical possibility.

By transforming himself into a chair—a process which ultimately consumes him, turning him into an inanimate object—one could argue that Woods participates in a kind of non-commodified work that brings a sense of solace to both him and his clients, signaling a motivation for work that exceeds capitalism's drive for profit. Woods's business is arguably a kind of survival making, a form of praxis, an enacted vulnerability as resistance. When asked why he chooses to become a chair, Woods answers, "The reason is that I made a mess of my life long ago. Living as a chair keeps the ruined parts from getting any bigger."⁴⁴ When told that he is "an outstanding chair" by his client, Woods feels "immeasurably happy."⁴⁵ Woods's chair services are marketed to "Sufferers of Exhaustion."⁴⁶ Client G acquires "the courage to look at her own face in the mirror"⁴⁷ and "the courage to go [back] to work"⁴⁸ after sitting on Woods. Client L also finds relief from her intractable back pain, which is at once physical and psychological, after hiring Woods as a chair: "Solid as a fossil, he was soothing to her."⁴⁹ Woods and his clients flourish with and through each other. As Ahmed puts it, survival is "what we do for others, with others. We need each other to survive; we need to be part of each other's survival."⁵⁰

What drives Woods's business is a form of care that is co-creative, intimate, exigent, and banal. There is intention, attentiveness, and attunement in the way Woods adjusts his chairing practice to each of his clients' unique bodies, needs, and vulnerabilities. For instance, the vignette of Woods making himself a chair for client G embodies a moment of intimate relationality and of mutual care/pleasure:

G would always come to Forrest Woods's place of business late at night, her body communicating to him its changing needs. By prior agreement, Woods wore plastic clothing and, after arranging himself as a chair with a backrest, he let her sit down on his lap. As she directed, he wrapped his arms around her waist, lowered his forehead to the back of her neck, and quietly waited for the hour to pass.⁵¹

Survival is collective and political work. And some of this vital, collective, political work takes the form of care,⁵² as in this short story. Woods's chair work is non-commodified work that brings a deep sense of comfort to both himself and his clients, signaling a motivation that exceeds capitalism's drive for profit.

The figure of Forrest Woods captures a powerful clash between failure and sustenance. The image of Woods becoming a chair, which tells a story of sickness—his face becoming “clay-like,” like “a dead moth on the wall”⁵³ and his limbs turning “rigid as iron”⁵⁴—offers a way to imagine a form of cripness that is defiant of compulsory positivity and optimism. Woods is so engrossed in his caring chair work, which for him is more life-affirming and life-sustaining than deadening, that the markers of illness, death, and decay seem to no longer matter. Observing Woods's final transformation, client L thinks to herself, “Naturally, it was voluntary; his face was utterly peaceful and calm.”⁵⁵ In his chair-like existence, Woods embodies ‘failure’ in relation to able-bodied ideals and works very much *against* the tempo of capitalist productivity and a future-directed outlook, gesturing at alternatives to chrononormativity—the normative “teleological schemes” of life events including marriage, wealth accumulation, reproduction, and death.⁵⁶ Woods's ‘chairing’ lacks the transgressive agency sought by bioethics, which aims for life-enhancing choices, and queer theory, which seeks rupture. Instead, through the figure of Forrest Woods, Hon proffers a way of thinking the chronic, of imagining her protagonist's “unending, repetitive, incessant, protracted, stubborn, persistent, frequent, [and] relentless” qualities as a mode of self-stylization and other relationality.⁵⁷ Hon's protagonist suggests a bioethics of a new sort, in which we might count a mode of being as a stance toward biopower's regulation of life and against compulsorily optimistic visions of cure.

At the story's conclusion, it appears that the market has triumphed, assimilating Woods in the form of a luxury commodity rather than a run-of-the-mill, mass-produced chair. The inexorable force of the marketplace seems to have won out: “[T]hings had turned out the way they had, and could not have been otherwise.”⁵⁸ However, it's crucial to note that while this state of being lacks agency, it is not entirely passive either;

in fact, it challenges the passive/active dichotomy. This ambivalence is evident in Forrest's (in)action, as recounted by Client L: "[O]ne day, he *stopped* speaking and eating altogether, and though I knew that he could hear me, he *wouldn't* open his eyes."⁵⁹ This passage highlights how, despite appearing passive, Forrest's deliberate refusal demonstrates agency, challenging conventional ideas of passivity and activity. As a living chair who is eventually sold off as a rarefied commodity, Woods foils differences between transgression and the reproduction of the status quo, capacity and debility, action and passivity. This ambiguity is captured in "Forrest Woods, Chair" by a technique that Berlant calls "lateral agency"⁶⁰—an extensive movement in directions other than forward or backward. It is a version of being the same, but more so—slower, perhaps, or quieter, or stiffer, or more chair-like.

4_ "Front Teeth"

"Front Teeth" is a short story that revolves around a lady called Pearl who suffers from severe overcrowding of her teeth: "an extraordinarily white and gleaming set of teeth crowded into the swollen tissue of her oral cavity, filling the entire roof of her mouth," making her face appear crooked.⁶¹ A dentist wishes to help Pearl remove her extra teeth, but he also desires her teeth, viewing them as an asset. The giant advertisement on the building across from the dentist's office boasts a deceptively cheerful slogan: "Smile—and the World Will Come to You."⁶² Within the world of the story, an inability to smile amiably, showing "the correct number of perfect white teeth,"⁶³ is considered a pathology that needs to be medically treated. Pearl suffers discrimination and even loses her job because of her dental condition, with her boss explaining: "We need smiles around here, the kind of smiles that make people happy."⁶⁴ In this neoliberal age, the superficial appearance of sociality and niceness—in the form of a gleaming smile—appears to be pegged to levels of productivity and profitability.

The first time the dentist catches sight of Pearl's mouth, he proclaims, "This is the saddest mouth I've ever seen."⁶⁵ Pearl loses her job for not being able to give a nice smile—one of the most banal gestures of everyday conduct that helps maintain the status quo. Unlike Pearl, the dentist's nurse has perfect teeth and wears a "perpetually smiling mouth"⁶⁶ that is "gentle and reassuring."⁶⁷ "Practically every patient who came to the dentist's office felt there was something familiar about the nurse's smile, and the nurse was convinced that this was why her job here was secure."⁶⁸ Because of her

excess teeth, Pearl is considered a liability in the business world as she fails to perform what Carrie T. Bramen calls “for-profit niceness.”⁶⁹ The judgmental, “relentless stares”⁷⁰ of Pearl’s former coworkers arise from an unexamined phobia of Pearl’s disabled body, a phobia that stems from capitalism’s structural need to rehabilitate and recruit all bodies into the national economy to maximize productivity.

The injunction to smile in the short story invites us to interrogate the affective dimension of capitalism, which finds expression through the terms of interpersonal sociability. This aspect of sociality is easy to overlook; it is as insipid and commonplace as the phrases “Have a nice day” and “Take care.” In “Niceness in a Neoliberal Age,” Bramen identifies a growing fixation with niceness that invokes niceness and other modes of positive sociality at a time of unprecedented cruelty. Bramen argues that the current embrace of niceness raises broader questions about the significance of sociality in a neoliberal age that has been linked to the “death of the social,” referring to the impact that neoliberalism has had on civil society.⁷¹ According to Bramen, niceness operates as “a behavioral Band-Aid,”⁷² compensating for deep structural inequalities through gestures of equality, such as a handshake or a smile. He concludes: “If we cannot be equal in a material sense, then at least we can behave as if we were.”⁷³

Madeleine Bunting highlights a similar paradox of ‘emotional labor’ in the service economy, where underpaid workers in call centers are required to be friendly and servile, offering an emotional service that they could never afford themselves.⁷⁴ Whether in call centers or dental clinics, one consequence of the mandated niceness of the service economy is the aggression that builds up and festers just below the surface of a perfectly professional smile. When the dentist’s nurse resigns from her job, claiming that she wants to enter the ‘Miss Smiley’ contest, the dentist realizes she might have grown tired of constantly smiling, perhaps “using smiles to cover up her boredom and disaffection.”⁷⁵ The exhaustion and disaffection that are likely hidden under the façade of the nurse’s smile point to the contested inflections of niceness, revealing how everyday modes of sociality typically associated with placating conflict and smoothing over disagreement are, in fact, riddled with contradictions.

Most people view disability as a medical impairment to be ‘fixed,’ whereas disability studies scholars see it as a condition shaped by discourse, environment, and social relations.⁷⁶ In the story, Pearl’s excess teeth cause mild physical discomfort. However, her true ‘disability’ stems from the loss of her job and social power due to her inability

to conform to profit-driven social expectations. What is hegemonically understood as the normal, able body is, for disability studies scholars, simply the ‘normate,’ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s term for a privileged, unstigmatized body functioning as the universal and unmarked type in a given society. “People who have healthy teeth”—in other words, the normate—“have a sort of power in their mouths—it opens up new pathways for them,” says Pearl to the dentist.⁷⁷ As Garland-Thomson puts it, those who approximate the socially constructed ideal image of the normate “can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them.”⁷⁸ In the story, the slogan ‘Smile—and the World Will Come to You,’ together with the visions of sociality it conveys, offers a tangible example of an optimistic promise which ultimately inhibits the thriving of people with disabilities.

Crip signing in this short story counters ideological notions of health, reproductive femininity, able-bodied longevity, and, once again, the compulsorily optimistic visions of cure. The protagonist’s overgrown teeth are likened to a thriving, “dense and lush forest filled with growing trees.”⁷⁹ Following the initial operation, new teeth sprout in the places where extra teeth were removed by the dentist. The first couple of extra teeth are described as having “sprouted *exuberantly*”⁸⁰ like green shoots. “The jumble of ivories” are also likened to a sprawling “forest of illegal buildings.”⁸¹ When the dentist examines the inside of Pearl’s mouth: “It was as if he were looking at a tree. The tree was sturdy, and the tips of its branches had tender leaves sprouting, but the most important thing was that it kept reaching for the heavens.”⁸²

Despite its gruesomeness and its emphasis on the visual markers of illness, the lively image signifies (however paradoxical, however crip) thriving. Represented through the image of a flourishing tree, Pearl’s cripness challenges narratives of fatality and despair.

Moreover, the story’s conclusion is neither recuperative nor optimistic; it is, instead, slippery and illegible. As the story comes to a close, no explanation or cure for Pearl’s condition is offered. Pearl’s teeth keep sprouting and she remains very much jobless. When Pearl offers to be the dentist’s nurse assistant, the dentist rejects her by simply answering “We need someone who can smile,”⁸³ thus further reinforcing Pearl’s bodily difference and perceived deviation from the so-called ‘natural order.’ A profound sense of disorientation marks the story’s ending, as Pearl “started walking toward the southeast [...] But before she could get anywhere, everything had moved into the realm of the unknown.”⁸⁴ As the story’s conclusion veers unexpectedly into ‘the realm of the

unknown,' the effect is disorienting, akin to the sensation of venturing off the 'straight' lines of the cultural logic of rehabilitation. This unsettling disruption or inaccurate sense of the body's connection to its surroundings is not always unwanted; it is not so much a "pocket of disorder to be avoided or promptly reordered."⁸⁵ Rather, the affective and intellectual disorientation that the reader might experience can offer a way to engage ethically with the "disempowered and dislocated experience"⁸⁶ of Pearl, a young woman living with disability.

Describing the productiveness of disorientation, Ahmed writes: "If orientations point us to the future, to what we are moving toward, then they also keep open the possibility of changing directions and of finding other paths."⁸⁷ The profoundly disorienting ending invites the reader to critique what Niall Martin and Mireille Rosello call "the conflation between disorientation and error, disorder or noise and the simultaneous equation between orientation and the norm or meaningfulness."⁸⁸ Ahmed suggests that moments of disorientation offer valuable opportunities for learning, as they enable us to see and interpret the world in new ways.⁸⁹ Disorientation is "vital"⁹⁰ to Ahmed, as it is often only through being disoriented "that we might learn what it means to be orientated in the first place."⁹¹ Pearl's sustaining cripness appears to be precisely the "disorientation device"⁹² that attunes us to what has been slipping to "the point at which things fleet"⁹³ away from safe and 'positive' epistemologies. Such a disorientation is necessary if we are to perform the political and cultural work of imagining crip horizons which help to problematize the discursive power (and the *actual* power) of the authoritarian state.

5_Conclusion

Disability in these short stories is at once a metaphor for the violent effects of global capitalism and a material reflection of how structural precarity disables certain bodies and lives. This simultaneity—where disability is both figurative and literal—demands an interpretive approach that considers how sociopolitical systems, rather than individual pathology, generate debility. As critical disability studies scholars have long emphasized, disability is not solely defined by how a person experiences their body, but by how they are disabled by the infrastructures, expectations, and exclusions embedded in societal norms and institutional structures.

In “Forrest Woods, Chair,” the protagonist’s transformation into a chair is not framed as explicitly painful or tragic. On the surface, it may appear that this metamorphosis is welcome or even empowering. However, a crip reading recognizes that such ‘satisfaction’ must be understood within the broader context of how neoliberal systems coerce subjects into accepting instrumentalization as survival. The protagonist’s bodily conversion into furniture reveals how capitalist logic collapses personhood into utility. This is not an empowerment narrative but a subtle portrayal of how individuals internalize and normalize their disposability. It is precisely this normalization that crip theory is equipped to challenge, by interrogating how productivity, ‘usefulness,’ and bodily compliance are rendered compulsory under biopolitical regimes.

Similarly, “Front Teeth” stages a grotesque form of bodily surplus—Pearl’s overproduction of teeth—as a narrative of commodification. Her ability to monetize her bodily excess becomes a survival mechanism in a system that exploits bodily difference for economic gain while simultaneously pathologizing it. This overgrowth, while not framed through conventional markers of disability, resonates with the experiences of those whose bodies are rendered economically viable only through extraction, whether labor, organs, or care. Both stories thus invite us to expand our understanding of debility beyond visible impairment to include the insidious forms of slow violence inflicted by neoliberal economies of extraction and abandonment.

To be sure, crip theory is not without its limitations. It may risk flattening the diverse embodiments and lived experiences of bodily difference if it treats all forms of anomaly or non-normativity as identifiably disabled. But this project does not seek to collapse all perceived deviations into disability. Rather, it uses crip theory as a lens to read how bodily transformation, anomaly, and commodification in Hon’s stories challenge the presumed neutrality of able-bodiedness and question who is permitted to flourish under conditions of state-sanctioned optimism and developmentalism.

Forrest Woods being sold off as a chair and Pearl selling her surplus teeth to her dentist both help illustrate the intricate nature of what we could call the “global economy of debility.”⁹⁴ This economy stretches across the North/South, East/West divides, enfolding some dis(en)abled lives while others are folded out of it.⁹⁵ People who sell their teeth for food or ‘donate’ their organs as transplants to disabled and sick people in the Global North would, in most cases, be unable to afford the life-saving operation in the country where they live.⁹⁶ All these acts represent the complicated

networks by which disability is produced and sustained. Within Hon's surrealist storyscape, the intentional ambiguity that surrounds the characters' specific locations and ethnic/racial identities (where characters tend to be cast in archetypal roles, such as Mother, Father, and Doctor) also speaks to the ways in which the search for radical crip imaginaries remains "inarticulable"⁹⁷ within the boundaries of compulsorily construed and stabilized identities.

Thus, Hon's work does more than simply metaphorize disability; it disorients normative assumptions about functionality, autonomy, and care. It also helps us imagine forms of embodied vulnerability and resistance that are not bound by fixed identity categories. This is what makes her stories such productive sites for cripistemological inquiry: they do not 'represent' disability in the traditional sense but gesture toward what Alison Kafer calls "crip futures"⁹⁸—the radical potential of reimagining how bodies relate to one another outside the demands of ableist temporality and capitalist production.

In the context of post-NSL Hong Kong, this interpretive frame becomes even more urgent. Hon's work offers insight into how the state's prescriptions of compulsory able-bodiedness, cheerful productivity, and harmonious development have become central to a broader ideological crackdown—not just on dissent, but on any alternative way of being. The speculative disfigurements in her fiction point not only to the harm done by such imperatives, but to the imaginative labor required to survive them. The stories' relevance, then, extends beyond the moment of their publication. Indeed, they presciently map the mechanisms of state control that would only intensify in the years that followed. In this new reality, the question is not merely how to survive within systems that commodify and disable, but how to resist and imagine otherwise. Hon's stories invite us to take this question seriously, not only as a narrative concern, but as a call to reconfigure how we read, critique, and theorize bodily difference in a world increasingly hostile to it.

Endnotes

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