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The Delightfully Scatological Humor of Ali Wong: Cringe Comedy and Neoliberal Maternal Discourse

In 2011, Yale University law professor Amy Chua generated a media spectacle with the publication of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which pulled Asian American women into the center of mothering debates in the United States. Part memoir and part parenting manual, *Battle Hymn* (2011) tells the story of how Chua managed to raise two high-achieving daughters, both of whom are A students and first-rate musicians. The book details the strict regimen of homework, music lessons, and tutoring that Chua devises and enforces for Sophia and Louisa ("Lulu"). By deliberately withholding praise and imposing frequent verbal abuse and threats, Chua teaches her daughters to absorb damage and bounce back to achieve ever-higher levels of productivity. My aim here is not to condemn, defend, or excuse Chua's parenting model but rather to contextualize *Battle Hymn* in relation to the racialized and classed dimensions of US neoliberal maternal discourse. Discussions of Chua's parenting practices have largely devolved into personalized attacks tinged with anti-Asian racism. Some critics construct Chua as an Oriental despot who is cruelly depriving Sophia and Lulu of their girlhood. It is important to note that Chua partly promotes this othering through her dichotomization of Chinese and Western parenting, but I am more interested in how the othering of the tiger mother serves to obscure the extent to which Chua's parenting model is both a product of and a response to the demands of thriving in racist, capitalist America.

As Pamela Thoma (2014) observes, the recent proliferation of Asian American women's popular literature reflects the imperative to consume and produce mainstream cultural narratives grounded in market fundamentalism, which has come to define Americanness in the contemporary moment (28). She calls attention to the gendered and racial constraints of neoliberal belonging for Asian American women, where citizenship "remains contingent upon

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how well they conform to normative ideologies . . . of femininity and domesticity as demonstrated through family formation and maternal labor" (26). *Battle Hymn* serves as an exemplary case in point. In her book, Chua presents a vision of the family as a privatized solution to the public crisis in education that implicitly promotes a minimal welfare state. As Susan Koshy (2013) argues, the tiger mother consolidates a model of productive citizenship, entrepreneurship, and filiality necessary for the reproduction of human capital at a time "when domestic prospects for individual and intergenerational economic mobility have foundered" (347). Chua assumes personal responsibility not only for the present material well-being of her children but also their future socioeconomic success.

It is no coincidence that Asian Americans have been increasingly racialized in terms of productivity, market-driven instrumentality, competition, and socioeconomic mobility. While these characteristics were negatively inflected by yellow peril discourse through the early 1990s, they are now generally valorized under neoliberalism.[1] In short, the construction of Asian Americans as the model minority fits snugly with neoliberalism's ideal self-regulating, self-enterprising citizen-subject. We can understand the tiger mother as a recent gendered, racial neoliberal formation produced in direct opposition to the "Black welfare mother" as a figure of pathological reproductive excess and dependency (Ferguson 2004, 124–25; Jun 2011, 126). Yet this latest twenty-first-century incarnation of model minority discourse can be distinguished by the way it has been mobilized to discipline not only nonwhite populations but also a foundering white majority (Koshy 2013, 345). *Battle Hymn* ignited a global parenting debate about the superiority of Chinese versus Western models that indexes broader geopolitical anxieties about the decline of American power and status in relation to a "rising Asia."[2]

[1] Yellow peril discourse, which constructs Asia/Asians as dangerous economic threats to the United States, can be traced to the nineteenth century and achieved legal expression through a series of anti-Asian exclusion laws. The rise and consolidation of Asian-American model minority discourse during the 1960s offered a different, more positive framing of the way this group has been perceived and racialized in economic terms. But as Helen Heran Jun elaborates, yellow peril imaginings persisted through the 1970s, when the United States was suffering from an economic recession and locked in a trade war with Japan, and the 1980s, as exemplified by the murder of Vincent Chen by white Detroit auto workers and the public outcry over the so-called overrepresentation of Asian-American students in elite universities. Although fears of a yellow peril will likely never disappear completely, I argue, along with Jun, that economic characteristics that are readily marked as Asian—hyperproductive, efficient, self-enterprising, competitive, market driven—have become widely celebrated under contemporary neoliberalism. See Jun (2011, 128–31).

[2] See, e.g., Clinton (2011).

The spectacular inclusion of Asian American mothers as what Thoma (2014) terms the "maternal model minority" belies a much longer history of anti-Asian exclusion (47).[3] The Page Law of 1875 barred the immigration of Chinese women on the grounds that their inclination for sex work would threaten white, middle-class American morality. We can understand Chua's performance of bourgeois maternal femininity—her always immaculate appearance; spectacularly slim body; tasteful, stylish outfits; and equally picture-perfect daughters and attractive white husband—as compelled by the need to repudiate or distance herself from the stereotype of deviant Asian female hypersexuality.[4] Her embrace of the neoliberal values of privatization and self-reliance also needs to be contextualized in relation to another popular stereotype: the Asian welfare cheat—Asian immigrants and refugees who "unfairly utiliz[e] public benefits instead of relying only on their well-to-do family members" (Fujiwara 2008, xv). Instead of a contradiction, the Asian welfare cheat serves as a constitutive element and effect of model-minority racialization, which promotes assumptions that this group does not have a legitimate need for public assistance (due to the socioeconomic success putatively achieved by an extended network of relatives in the United States). This narrative, of course, disavows the potential limits of the family to shoulder the burdens and costs of privatization.

In this essay I extend an analysis of Asian American bourgeois motherhood that has gained public recognition and visibility in the United States through a focus on the stand-up comedian, actress, and writer Ali Wong, who has recently skyrocketed to fame with her two hit Netflix comedy specials *Baby Cobra* (2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (2018). Whereas Chua's *Battle Hymn* engendered polarizing responses in the mainstream media and Internet blogosphere, Wong has been perhaps too sanguinely embraced as a heroine for white feminists and the Asian American community. The autobiographical content of Wong's jokes and other writings reveal that she embodies the ideal self-regulating, self-enterprising neoliberal maternal subject in strikingly similar ways to Chua. Wong responsibly manages fertility, "trapping" a Harvard Business School husband and establishing a successful TV career before having her first child at age thirty-three, thereby mitigating dependency on state services. Wong also performs both comedy specials visibly pregnant, exhibiting feminine forms of bodily resilience that US neoliberalism demands—she pushes the limits of her pregnant body to continue working and evidently bounces back to do it all over again. Wong has been praised in mainstream US media for effectively balancing motherhood and her professional aspirations. According

[3] See also Lee (2016, 63–64).

[4] See McRobbie (2013) on the new "maternal-feminine" (135).

to one article, "after putting her daughter to bed, Wong travels to comedy clubs around Los Angeles to perfect new stand-up material" (Yorks 2018). In this respect, Wong serves as an exemplar of model minority motherhood. Yet I will demonstrate how Wong negotiates the complex gendered and racial constraints of cultural citizenship in subversive ways through her stand-up comedy.

This essay explores the limits and possibilities of comedy for disrupting neoliberal maternal discourse and is thus in conversation with the work of feminist comedy scholars such as Patricia Mellencamp (1990), Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (1995), Rebecca Krefting (2014), and Linda Mizejewski (2014), among others. This tradition of scholarship emphasizes and celebrates a body politics of female excess. Karlyn (1995) famously theorizes the power of the "unruly woman" to challenge gendered expectations through her loud laughter, garrulousness, and grotesque corporeality (3–4). The unruliness that manifests in Wong's pregnant performances of *Baby Cobra* and *Hard Knock Wife* is especially subversive given the heightened pressures imposed on expecting mothers to carefully monitor, control, and regulate their bodies at all stages—before, during, and after pregnancy. As Liza Tsaliki (2019) observes, neoliberal discourse frames "good body management" as "a prerequisite for and symbol of good future motherhood." Through her hilariously filthy poop and pussy jokes, Wong compels audiences to confront the various ways the body—and even more so the pregnant body—cannot be disciplined according to the temporal imperatives of neoliberal capitalism.

Wong's raunchy performance certainly runs the risk of perpetuating dominant Western stereotypes of Asian womanhood. The Asian female body has long been exoticized and eroticized in Hollywood cinema and television, and much of this enduring imagery is predicated on a body whose boundaries are imagined to be unruly and penetrable in sexual terms. Yet Wong's bold, shameless embrace of hypersexuality can also be read as a resistance against the norms that limit definitions of sexuality and what proper Asian femininity and motherhood look like—norms that are grounded in white, middle-class values and ideals. Insofar as Asian American women cannot escape their gendered racial sexualization in US culture, Wong enacts what Celine Parreñas Shimizu (2007) terms "productive perversity" (6) by contesting the meanings of hypersexuality in ways that allow for a more transformative understanding of power, pleasure, pain, and the political. Rather than a simple act of self-exoticization, Wong creatively rearticulates hypersexuality in the realm of cringe comedy. Her cringe humor and aesthetic can be connected to the famously raunchy, scatological performances of Margaret Cho, a Korean American stand-up comedian who rose to prominence in the 1990s, a generation before Wong. In this essay, however, I limit my focus to

Wong because of her direct engagement with the gendered racial expectations and pressures of motherhood in the contemporary moment.

Cringe comedy is a genre that is primarily defined by the kind of affective bodily responses it elicits from viewers. It often features situations of social awkwardness or humiliation that are simultaneously humorous and uncomfortable, even painful, to watch because they evoke a sense of second-hand shame. Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma (2020) trace how cringe comedy is often positioned as a problem for feminist studies from its misogynistic iterations of "oversexualized 'raunch' and 'gross-out' humor" to its feminized representations in the 1990s and 2000s chick flick, which regularly derives laughs from the heroine's physical humiliations (83). But along with Havas and Sulimma, I contend that cringe comedy can be mobilized in generative, disruptive ways to expose our collective investment in the fantasy of the good life and the deeply compromised politics for achieving it.

In the following, I demonstrate how the cringe comes to be produced through the intersection of Wong's unruly, pregnant embodiment and her fervent rejection of adult maternal responsibility, which can be gleaned from her frequent deployment of immature poop jokes and body humor. The unruly bodily discharges that serve as the focus of much of Wong's standup—excrement and postpartum excretions—are significantly nonreproductive. Through her deployment of gross, intensely scatological humor, Wong invites us to cringe at how women are called upon to reproduce the structures of neoliberal capitalism that relentlessly extract their paid and unpaid labor to compensate for persistent inequalities and the increasing privatization of social services.

As I will demonstrate, Wong rejects the brand of corporate feminism exemplified by Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, emphasizing how all she wants to do is *lie down*. This assertion elicits a cringe in the context of a neoliberal recessionary climate where the aspiration to not work has become unspeakable. As an apparently passive, supine posture, lying down might also elicit a cringe from academic feminists because, as Lori Marso (2018) points out, it runs counter to the "public goals of feminism" (2). Instead of a radical antiracist, feminist politics, Wong presents viewers with a politics of exhaustion. She does not want to be a corporate climber, mother, political activist, or celebrity, for that matter, because she is tired and just wants to rest. The notion of lying down is cringey because it seems entirely non(re)productive, not getting us any closer to the good life or contributing in any meaningful way to contemporary antiracist, feminist political struggles. Yet I argue that lying down provides an ethical vantage point from which to critique the heightened demands for female labor, especially from women of color, that have become nearly impossible to refuse in today's aspirational neoliberal

culture. Assuming and thinking from this horizontal position can also prompt more critical reflection on the types of exhausted bodies that an antiracist, feminist politics produces and relies on. By repeatedly redirecting the cringe from the usual individual subject or object of humiliation to the gendered and racial power structures that govern motherhood under contemporary neoliberalism, Wong's stand-up offers a generative point of departure for theorizing more viable models of antiracist feminist politics, agency, and subjectivity.

Model minority jokes in neoliberal times

Reflecting on the success of her first Netflix comedy special, Wong notes in *Hard Knock Wife* (2018) how people often ask her what her parents think about her stand-up, which she identifies as a very "racially charged question." In her usual candid, sassy manner, Wong asserts: "Like what they're really asking is, 'What do your oppressive Asian parents who beat you with the SAT book until your fingers bled from playing the cello think about your butthole-licking jokes?'" Here Wong alludes to familiar stereotypes of Asian parenting that resonate with Chua's *Battle Hymn*—the prioritization of standardized testing and classical music training as the path to upward mobility and the draconian enforcement of rigorous study and practice through corporeal punishment. Instead of developing the finger dexterity that has purchase due to the way Asian women have been racialized under transnational capitalism, Wong cultivates a wayward tongue that revels in cracking jokes and licking butttholes.[5] This obscene obsession with the bottom is seen to violate model minority norms of respectability grounded in an Asian cultural emphasis on filial obedience and familial honor. In *Hard Knock Wife*, Wong upends these assumptions when she delivers, with a mock deadpan expression, the punch line of her joke: "My older sister is an unemployed lesbian who lives on my mother's property. So I can do whatever I want. . . . I could take a shit on this stage right now, and my mom would be like, 'You bring so much honor to our family. I am so proud of you, my golden child.'" Wong reveals that her parents could care less about her butt-licking jokes; she is the "golden child" because she has managed to turn her stand-up into a lucrative career. In this way, Wong positions the Asian immigrant family as less an alien cultural formation and more an opportunistic or survivalist formation that adapts to the demands of thriving in a racist, unequal capitalist system.[6]

Wong suggests that, under contemporary neoliberalism, it has become more shameful to be an "unemployed lesbian" who lives at home with her

[5] On the racialization of Asian women in transnational capitalist economies, see Kang (2002, 165) and Tu (2003, 268).

[6] See Ninh (2011, 22).

parents than to spontaneously shit in front of a live audience. This joke elicits a cringe not simply from Wong's reliance on lowbrow scatological humor but from its antiqueer punch line. The cringe, as Marso (2018) points out, "is evoked by not knowing whether [one] *should* be laughing" (3). In addition to a reflexive bodily contraction, then, the cringe prompts another kind of inward turn that can allow for more nuanced critical reflection to take place on what one can or cannot bear to laugh at (Berlant and Ngai 2017, 235). As Marso (2018) asserts, "The bodily cringe that accompanies our laughter might itself be material evidence that the joke is doing its subversive work" (3). We can read Wong's cringeworthy joke as an invitation to seriously contemplate whether we should be laughing at her sister for being unemployed, for living at home with her parents, for being queer. United States media has coined the term "boomerang" to describe millennials in their twenties and thirties who have failed to launch an independent adult life and need to move back in with their parents for housing and financial support.[7] The rising number of boomerangs has been popularly attributed to millennials' sense of entitlement and lack of a strong Protestant work ethic or flaws in parenting—the coddling that inhibited this generation from learning how to stand on its own two feet (Newman 2012, xix).

By insisting that it is more disgraceful to be a non(re)productive queer person in the United States today than to engage in an act of public defecation, Wong highlights the absurdity of the way bodies are valued under contemporary neoliberalism. Cringing at Wong's joke, in this instance, opens up space for critical reflection on the various structural barriers that might lead one to boomerang instead of advancing into independent adulthood in a linear (forward/upward) fashion such as massive student debt, rising housing costs, changing labor conditions under globalization, and uneven access to health care. By using the example of her unemployed lesbian sister, Wong illuminates how being a boomerang precludes her sister from heteronormative reproductive respectability in ways that exacerbate her social marginalization. Financial dependence on her parents excludes her from full adulthood, which is often marked by becoming a parent oneself. This is significant given that parenthood (biological or via adoption) continues to be one of the main requisites and avenues for queer inclusion in the United States today.[8] We might also consider those who lack a private familial safety net. What happens if you have no one or nowhere to boomerang back to?

The spectacle of Wong's pregnant body on stage serves to enhance the contrast between her and her unemployed lesbian sister. Wong is visibly

[7] See, e.g., Palmer (2007) and Dickler (2018).

[8] See Puar (2007, 38–39) and Eng (2010, 26–34).

performing gestational labor as well as the labor of stand-up comedy. But her deployment of scatological cringe humor disrupts her maternal model-minority image. Indeed, Wong foists on audiences a vision of her pooping on stage in place of the properly feminine/maternal act of giving birth to a baby. In the following, I examine how Wong refuses the neoliberal mandate to become an aspirational professional wife and mother in favor of lying down.

Lying down and the freedom to poop

In *Baby Cobra* (2016), Wong draws on and borrows the formal conventions of self-help to upend the genre's aspirational neoliberal logic. The stand-up comedienne provides an almost step-by-step guide on how she managed to "trap" her Harvard Business School husband that viewers can presumably follow to obtain their own elite spouse: "We've been together now for five years, and for five years, I've packed his lunch every single day." The burst of applause and "awws" from the audience convey approval of Wong's performance of proper Asian femininity—of the doting, domestic girlfriend. In the punch line of her joke, however, Wong reveals this to be nothing more than a self-conscious performance: "I did that so he'd become dependent on me. 'Cause he graduated from Harvard Business School, and I don't wanna work anymore. . . . I don't feed him out of the goodness of my heart. I do it as an investment in my financial future." Wong upends the notion that heterosexual marriage is invariably grounded in female economic dependence by emphasizing how she trains her partner to be dependent on her and by reframing marriage as a pathway to early retirement. While this joke serves as a funny, refreshing assertion of female agency, it relies on and perpetuates gendered and racial stereotypes in a way that can be cringe inducing. The stigmatization of the female gold digger becomes exacerbated by her racialization in terms of Asian market-driven instrumentality and calculative scheming. Wong diligently packs her partner's lunch not out of love or "the goodness of [her] heart" but for personal financial gain, which reinforces dominant stereotypes of Asians as deficient of the full capacity for human feelings. While she flags Harvard Business School as a marker of her partner's high future earning potential, Wong implies elsewhere that race figures centrally in her calculations. In *Hard Knock Wife* (2018), she humorously challenges the emasculating representations of Asian men popularized by Hollywood by emphasizing how they are sexy because they have "no body hair from the neck down," concluding with the punch line: "Asian men, *no body odor*. None. They just smell like responsibility."[9] Wong points to how Asian

[9] On emasculating representations of Asian men in US popular culture, see Chin and Chan (1972, 68).

men have become especially sexy in the contemporary neoliberal moment, where this group has been singled out and racialized as good, responsible investments.

Diane Negra (2014) traces how the postfeminist dating and conduct books that flourished in the 1990s have given way to a new wave of business self-help books that are focused on women's relationships to work and helping them to achieve professional opportunities and advancement (278–79). *Baby Cobra* (2016) evokes and playfully disrupt these trends. Wong channels a neoliberal logic of self-management and responsible investment to establish stable family conditions precisely so that she will not have to work anymore. This aspiration to not work upends the model minority discourse that racializes Asian Americans as hardworking economic citizens and elicits a cringe because it is so counter to the aspirational neoliberal ethos directed at women today. The increasing importance of female labor power to the neoliberal economy renders the desire to not work unspeakable and untenable.

In *Baby Cobra*, Wong lampoons Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg's popular book, *Lean In*, which challenges women to sit at the table, pursue their career goals with gusto, and obtain leadership positions in the workplace. In response to Sandberg, Wong asserts, "I don't want to *Lean In*, okay? I wanna *lie down*. I want to lie the fuck down! I think feminism is the worst thing that ever happened to women. Our job used to be no job." It is easy to see how Wong's joke, which relies on and perpetuates the notion that domestic labor is not real labor, might elicit a cringe from feminists. Yet I am interested in the distinction Wong establishes between leaning in, as a feminist bodily posture, and lying down. Whereas leaning in will, according to Sandberg, empower women to rise to the top, lying down suggests that one is comfortable remaining at the bottom and evokes feminine weakness, docility, and passivity. Lying down can also be read as a feminine form of self-indulgence or laziness—the shirking of familial, economic, and sociopolitical responsibilities.

Yet Wong's joke also invites us to grapple with the way historical feminist efforts to empower women by promoting and cultivating an independent, confident, assertive subjectivity have been co-opted by neoliberal capitalism. The call for women to lean is exemplary of what many scholars have identified as a postfeminist preoccupation with self-fashioning and the makeover.[10] The suggestion that individual women, instead of systems of gender inequality and sexism, need to be reformed is aligned with a neoliberal logic of privatization. The convergence of postfeminism and neoliberalism,

[10] See, e.g., McRobbie (2004, 10–11) and Negra (2014, 275).

in short, disciplines subjects to adapt to sudden shifts and demands in the global economy and to keep on striving despite ever-diminishing possibilities for upward mobility. In this context, lying down can be understood as a profound refusal of the relentless pressure to turn crisis and damage into productivity, to overcome and resolve structural problems in largely privatized ways. Wong's exclamation, "I want to lie the fuck down!" resonates because it captures the exhaustion—physical, psychic, and emotional—of living under neoliberal capitalism, but it also points to how traditional feminist models of political agency such as leaning in and rising up may be similarly exhausted and are no longer enough to combat contemporary violence. As I will elaborate below, the politics and ethics of lying down that Wong articulates might be precisely the path for reinvigorating antiracist, feminist struggles today.

Wong deploys scatological humor that fixates on the unruly bottom to poke fun at the neoliberal feminist call to lean in and seize top leadership positions in the workplace. She observes that no matter how high you climb up the corporate ladder, you will still have to go to an office bathroom to shit every day. In *Baby Cobra* (2016), Wong again glamorizes the life of the housewife in ways that might make feminists cringe, asserting: "Housewives get to shit in their house. Skin to seat. They . . . are free to just blow ass into the toilet . . . while watching as much Netflix on their iPad as they want!" She is, of course, describing a very specific class of housewives who can afford Netflix accounts and iPads and is minimizing the labor involved in being a housewife. In this bit, however, Wong ultimately redirects the cringe toward the disciplinary mechanisms of corporate culture and the built environment of corporate spaces, which seek to regulate the body to ridiculous extremes. Wong bemoans the cheap one-ply toilet paper that employees are forced to use because of corporate efforts to cut costs and maximize profits and productivity. As Wong pantomimes, office toilet paper is totally ineffective for wiping excrement: "It basically just dehydrates your butthole. . . . I literally spat on my toilet paper two days ago, to try to make a MacGyver baby wipe to moisten it, and then it backfired 'cause my fingers broke through and digitally stimulated more doo to come out." As Wong points out, its flimsiness, which is what makes the toilet paper "difficult to pull out" of the holder in the first place, disciplines employees to ration their use of corporate supplies and thus serves a double cost-cutting function.

The lack of floor-to-ceiling stalls adds another layer of stress as Wong divulges: "You can never finish wiping at work because . . . you're paranoid that your coworker's gonna recognize your shoes underneath the stall. And you're like, 'Oh, no! Courtney's listening. She's waiting. She's timing me.'"

Fearful that someone is listening to and judging her for not pooping in an appropriately feminine and timely manner, Wong rushes in the effort to avoid this humiliation. But as a result, she never manages to completely finish wiping and must endure the discomfort of a butthole "caked in doo doo all day long." Wong presses us to recognize how there is something deeply wrong with a corporate culture where one is not allowed the time to freely poop and wipe in accordance with the needs of our respective bodies or where walking around all day with unclean, poop-crusted buttholes is the price for obtaining top leadership positions. The sight of Wong's unruly pregnant body as she pops a squat and pantomimes her anxious, hurried efforts to wipe her butt compels us to consider what neoliberalism's temporal imperatives of bodily regulation mean for pregnant women, new mothers, and gender equity more broadly, which I will expand on in the following section.

Wong ultimately upends the self-help formula that she expounds on in *Baby Cobra* by revealing how her careful plans and calculations severely backfire. As it turns out, Wong's husband is the one who "trapped her ass" with his staggering $70,000 Harvard Business School debt. In addition to paying off his debt with her "hard-earned TV money," Wong explains that she is performing on stage seven and a half months pregnant precisely because "if I don't work, we die." In this way, she disrupts the image of her as the inherently diligent, dutiful maternal model minority—she is literally standing up because she cannot lie down. *Baby Cobra* compels us to consider, alongside Wong, bodies that, due to the intersectional effects of class and other vectors of power, are not allowed to lie down, as well as those racialized and feminized bodies that have historically been forced into a horizontal position through systematic processes of debilitation—those for whom standing up will not translate into upward mobility.

Postpartum pussy excretions

In *Baby Cobra* (2016), Wong divulges that her greatest aspiration is to become a housewife because nothing beats being able to shit in the comfort of your own home. This vision is shattered by her second comedy special, *Hard Knock Wife* (2018), as Wong comes to experience first hand what it means to be a stay-at-home mom. Instead of enjoying leisurely poops while watching Netflix on her iPad, we see that Wong is overwhelmed with taking care of her daughter. Wong elaborates how the insides of her nose have been singed from too much poo sniffing, which is nothing compared to the state of her nipples—horribly cracked and chaffed from breastfeeding. In addition to deglamorizing the life of a career woman, as one characterized by "boring, repressed shits," Wong relentlessly deglamorizes motherhood.

While jokes and deflationary commentary about the hardships of new parenthood are now a well-established comic tradition that includes the work of popular American stand-up comedians including Louis CK, Maryellen Hooper, and Jim Gaffigan, among others, Wong moves this tradition into the realm of cringe through her unruly pregnant body. The loud, form-fitting bodycon dress she wears in both comedy specials accentuates her pregnant belly. Anne Helen Petersen (2017) traces how the public display of the pregnant body has historically been denigrated as "unsophisticated, trashy, unbecoming, obscene"—"the pregnant body is a woman's body at its most fecund, but also in its most grotesque figuration: the body swells, expands, and oozes, the boundary between inside and outside permeable" (114). Pregnancy, Petersen explains, is "the most vivid proof of a woman's sexuality" so it is no coincidence that in a patriarchal US culture, dominant representations of mothers would be patently desexualized (115). Since American actress Demi Moore's daring nude pregnant appearance on the 1991 cover of *Vanity Fair*, pregnancy has no longer been considered an abject physical state that needs to be sequestered from public view. Indeed, pregnancy has been transformed through the convergence of neoliberal capitalism and postfeminism into an opportunity for women to enjoy "a differently sexy and fashionable figure" (Tsaliki 2019).

But as Petersen (2017) rightly cautions, "no matter how emancipatory it might seem for the pregnant body to be visible, that visibility means subjugation to regimes of respectability and regulation under patriarchy" (133). Only specific forms of pregnant embodiment are considered beautiful—"white, tight, slender, and youthful bodies with social capital and aspiration" (Tsaliki 2019). Wong fits within this normative body type, and her ability to pass as East Asian (despite her Vietnamese-Chinese heritage) allows her to escape the intense public scrutiny and ridicule that American media personality and reality star Kim Kardashian endured during her pregnancy.[11] Kardashian donned tight bodycon maternity dresses not unlike the ones Wong wears in her two comedy specials, but her attire was scathingly attacked on social media as trashy, vulgar, and decidedly unmaternal. These divergent public reactions can be attributed to how Kardashian fails to conform to the white ideal of pregnant beauty—her body is too fat, too curvy, too brown, in short, too unruly.

Insofar as Wong meets the standards of reproductive respectability on a visual level, I locate her unruliness in how she mobilizes her pregnant body to perform intensely scatological stand-up routines that compel an affective

[11] See Petersen (2017, 111–34) and Tsaliki (2019).

withdrawal from the maternal imperative in terms of both biological and social reproduction.[12] This bodily cringe opens up space for more critical interrogation of the centrality of motherhood to the good life. In *Hard Knock Wife*, Wong challenges dominant narratives of pregnancy, which emphasize the difficulty of labor, of pushing for nineteen hours, but often end with the triumphant delivery of a beautiful baby. She directs attention to the painful bleeding and messy postpartum excretions that have been omitted from the US cultural imagination: "Nobody told me about all the crazy shit that comes out of your pussy after you give birth. You know what happens after the baby comes out? You know what else exits? [long beat] Her house. Her living room, her pillows . . . all the food that went bad in her refrigerator . . . for months!" These postpartum pussy excretions are unruly because they are distinctly nonreproductive (blood, uterine tissue, etc.) and do not serve a legible maternal, caregiving function. In a society where a woman's value continues to be defined in terms of her reproductive capacity and labor, a child is seen as the only proper object to be discharged from the female body.

Lauren Berlant (1997) traces how the right-wing agenda of the Reagan revolution elevated the child/fetus to the status of the ideal American citizen. She argues that the current polity in the United States is not organized around "an actually existing and laboring adult" (6) but rather an "infantile citizen" (28). The child's lack of agency, often framed as innocence, is indeed what allows this figure to exert ethical claims on adult political agents. Lee Edelman (2004) goes even further, contending that the child constitutes the horizon and ideological limit of contemporary US politics, which he describes as a politics of "reproductive futurism" (2). Edelman observes

[12] While Wong's pregnant body is not unruly in terms of physical size, shape, and color, it becomes unruly through its "excessive" exposure on stage. In her book *Dear Girls*, Wong divulges: "The most I ever felt like a real outsider as a female comedian was when I got pregnant the second time. A hacky comic came up to me . . . and said, 'So this is your hook, this is your thing, right? . . . You're so lucky, Ali. Me, I'm just another white guy. But you are both a female *and* a minority'" (2019, 72). This anecdote invites audiences to cringe along with Wong as the white comic invalidates all of the time and effort she put into refining her jokes by attributing her success to the mere fact that she is a "female *and* a minority." Wong challenges this narrative of neoliberal multiculturalism by calling attention to the long history in which the intersectional effects of gender and race served as the very condition for marginalization in the entertainment industry. This exchange also reveals how pregnancy is seen as a gimmick, a ploy to hook audiences and fast-track Wong's rise to the top of the comedy world. Sianne Ngai (2017) theorizes the gimmick as a "capitalist aesthetic phenomenon" that provokes irritation and contempt precisely because "it 'abbreviates' work and time" (468, 467). In this context, the white comic's equation of Wong's pregnancy to a gimmick reveals the extent to which female gestational labor continues to be minimized and not recognized as labor at all.

how nearly all political struggles have been framed as a "fight for the children"—the fantasmatic beneficiary of every reform, which casts queerness as politically unthinkable, as "the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children'" (3). For Edelman, reproductive futurism is a fundamentally antiqueer politics that "preserv[es] . . . the absolute privilege of heteronormativity" (2). He insists that queerness attains its ethical value by acceding to its radically negative figural position as that which opposes the viability of a sociopolitical order organized around the child.

While Wong's stand-up comedy cannot be characterized as antireproductive futurism and does not meet the queer ethical standard that Edelman delineates, her gendered and racialized pregnant embodiment presses us to consider the different meanings and stakes of a politics of reproductive futurism for women of color whose children have historically not been seen as a symbol of the future—a population for whom a future was not at all guaranteed. Wong's performance points to the need to critically reexamine the queer politics and ethics of no future that Edelman theorizes through a more nuanced intersectional framework. While Wong does not refuse the heteronormative maternal imperative, as evident from the spectacle of her pregnant body on stage, she does affectively reorient a politics of reproductive futurism around the figure of the new mother (as opposed to the child) in important and subversive ways. Berlant (1997) traces how ongoing efforts to redefine citizenship around the fetus rely on new technologies of fetal imaging that increasingly usurp the "representational space of public dignity and value that used to be reserved as a utopian promise for women" (84). In this context, Berlant argues, "the pregnant woman becomes . . . more minor and less politically represented than the fetus" (85).

By repeatedly displacing the child as the proper object of care, Wong's stand-up comedy articulates a politics that aims to recenter the laboring adult mother and to illuminate the already fragile conditions of US women's citizenship, especially for women of color. Continuing the above joke, Wong notes that the only way to manage messy postpartum excretions is by stealing the special disposable "mesh fishnet underwear that's exclusively available at the hospital." Wong underscores: "you can't get that shit on Amazon or anything."[13] In this way, Wong redirects the cringe from the gross description of her postpartum pussy excretions to a sexist economic system. Wong suggests that what is truly cringeworthy is how new mothers cannot buy the appropriate underwear to accommodate their postpartum bodies and are forced to steal them from hospital maternity wards. The lack

[13] *The Cut* published an article by Edan Lepucki about new mom underwear in 2016.

of availability of these products points to how women's needs have been historically neglected. Wong challenges the temporal orientation of a politics of reproductive futurism that privileges the infantile citizen by directing attention to the structural support new mothers urgently need in the present.[14]

These recent developments are certainly important, progressive changes, but they are primarily concentrated in the market. Tanya Klich (2019), a writer for *Forbes*, calls attention to the rise of the so-called "new mom economy." Klich notes: "Over the past six years, investors across the country have poured $500 million into . . . apps, gadgets, products, and services targeting first-time Millennial parents with a child under the age of one." Many of these start-ups were founded by women, who continue to face an uphill battle to convince a male-dominated venture capitalist community that there is profit to be gained from attending to and supporting the needs of new moms. Yet we can see how this noble feminist goal can be easily co-opted by neoliberal capitalism, as new moms are included on the basis of their value as potential consumers. This growing new mom economy obscures the ongoing divestment of poor women of color. The availability of postpartum recovery kits and other new mom products and services, while a step in the right direction, does not guarantee access.

In the contemporary neoliberal moment, where the burden of reform is increasingly being displaced onto the market or the individual, Wong's engagement with the issue of maternity leave is especially crucial and timely. Whereas other developed countries, including Canada, France, and Germany, offer women up to three years of paid maternity leave, Wong notes that there is currently no federal policy for paid maternity leave in the United States. Wong suggests that this has to do with popular assumptions of maternity leave as frivolous mother-baby bonding time and an excuse to avoid getting back to "real" work. Wong deploys gross, scatological humor to overturn these assumptions. In one of the most cringey routines of *Hard Knock Wife* (2018), Wong (re)enacts a visit to a friend who had to undergo an emergency C-section after being in labor for seventy-two hours, during which her friend aggressively compels her to look at what childbirth did to her pussy: "No, 'Hello, Ali. Welcome. Come meet my beautiful new baby.' No, just, 'Come on, you look at this shit! You look at what happened to me!' . . . And her pussy looked crazy! It looked cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs! When I saw it, I was like . . . [loud gasp]. Because her pussy straight up looked

[14] In August 2019, Fridababy, a company that makes baby-care products, finally launched the first (and indeed very belated) line of products specifically designed for women's bodies postchildbirth (Fetters 2019).

like two hanging dicks side by side." In her one-woman (re)enactment of this scene, Wong pantomimes her friend, yanking up her skirt and gesturing emphatically to the audience to look at her pussy. This bit evokes laughter as well as the unmistakable bodily cringe as camera shots of the live audience reveal some members looking down or away in discomfort.

The cringe derives, in part, from Wong's undoing of gender. Insofar as childbirth has been constructed as the ultimate measure and affirmation of one's womanhood, Wong disrupts that narrative by describing how a grueling labor renders her friend's female genitalia unrecognizable and indeed transforms it into something that more closely resembles "two hanging dicks side by side." The cringe is intensified by Wong's visibly pregnant body. Wong's raunchy pantomime of her friend flashing her pussy to the entire cul-de-sac does not conform to gender expectations of the bodily posture new mothers should assume. We can understand Wong as taking a considerable risk by defying the sanctified image of motherhood in this bit. As Mizejewski (2014) notes, "the unruly woman is an ambivalent rather than wholly positive figure because of misogynist suspicion and contempt for the female body's leakiness and openness" (23). Wong stages a "carnivalesque drama of 'becoming'" (23) that compels viewers to confront the traumatic impact of childbirth on women's bodies. By emphasizing how her friend's pussy "looked cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs," Wong again displaces the child as the proper object of care. She depicts the postpartum pussy as itself hungry for some chocolate-flavored children's cereal, for the care and nourishment it has been structurally denied. Wong drives this point home when she exclaims: "Maternity leave is not just to bond with the baby. Fuck the baby! Maternity leave is for new moms to hide and heal their demolished-ass bodies!" Instead of cringing at crazy-looking postpartum pussies, Wong suggests that we should really be cringing at the lack of a US federal policy for maternity leave.

As I have detailed, Wong's stand-up comedy focuses on the abject, nonreproductive excretions from the female body that are typically obscured or deliberately shielded from view because they do not conform to gender expectations of proper femininity, which largely continues to be measured and defined in maternal terms. In this way, Wong reclaims the scatological as part of the reality of being a woman and a mother and as a basis for advocating for more structural support that will enable this female constituency to live with dignity. The one bit about breastfeeding and breast milk in *Hard Knock Wife* revolves around Wong's clogged duct. Wong begins by relating her mother's dismay at her insistence on breastfeeding: "She was like, 'Why are you breastfeeding? I raised you on formula, and look how shiny your hair is. . . . Are you falling for the bullshit slogan, "breast is best"?' I was like, 'No . . . I do it because breast is free. . . . Local, organic, free-range, farm-to-mouth milk

squirting outta my titties.'" Here Wong relies on and perpetuates stereotypes of Asian cheapness that might elicit a cringe, but the joke quickly turns to poke fun at the white bourgeois fetishization of locally sourced, organic, farm-to-table foodstuffs, which has become both a status symbol and a moral imperative under contemporary neoliberal regimes of health. Wong divulges: "As it turns out, breastfeeding is not free because you have to buy all of these pillows and pumps to support your breastfeeding, and then you might get a clogged duct. . . . And then you have to call a lactation consultant. A lactation consultant is a white NPR listener with dreadlocks named Indigo that you have to pay $200 to rush over to your house and Roto-Rooter your titty." Here, Wong mobilizes the stereotype of Asian cheapness to get audiences to question why breastfeeding is so absurdly expensive, to cringe at the development of an industry that extracts profit from getting women to make use of a resource that derives from their own bodies. Insofar as breastfeeding has become established as a dominant measure of whether one is a good or bad mother, Wong's joke compels us to consider what this moral calculus means in the context of an unequal system, where not everyone can afford a $200 lactation consultant. In the following section, I explore how Wong engages with the classed dimensions of neoliberal maternal discourse as they intersect, in particular, with race and ethnicity.

Wong's Ukrainian nanny and new regimes of exhaustion

In *Hard Knock Wife*, Wong relates how a lot of people like to ask her how she manages to balance family and career. She divulges her secret trick, which turns out to not be a trick at all: "I have a nanny. That's it, that's the answer." Anticipating the cringe, Wong notes that her reliance on paid domestic help is "very unlikeable and unpopular to broadcast . . . because not everyone can afford a nanny." This cringe derives, in part, from the uncomfortable way the figure of the nanny draws attention to the increasingly stratified conditions for family formation, which undermine the foundational American ideal of equality. The resurgent emphasis on individualism and self-reliance under neoliberalism also renders the nanny a stigmatized figuration of maternal dependency. In this context, Wong's open acknowledgment of her class privilege and need for extrafamilial child-rearing support serves as an important and refreshing point of divergence from other celebrity mothers such as Chua, who disavows the extent to which class privilege renders her form of tiger mothering possible.

Wong's joke illuminates the crucial role of paid domestic help to the smooth functioning of the American nuclear family. Yet it stops short of contextualizing this figure within a globalized care economy that continues

to be largely fueled by poor, migrant women of color.[15] Wong does not identify her nanny with any specific racial or ethnic markers in her joke, but she reveals elsewhere that her nanny, Sofiya, is from Ukraine, which complicates the traditional mapping of domestic labor as a movement of women from the global South to take care of privileged families in the global North. As an Eastern European figure, Wong's Ukrainian nanny indexes shifts in the globalized care economy and embodies a minoritized racial and classed subject position in relation to Wong's privileged position as an American celebrity. It is, for all these reasons, hard not to cringe when Wong asserts: "It's super expensive [to have a nanny]. It's expensive for me and my husband, so the both of us, we have to hustle, we have to work very hard to not take care of our child ourselves." Here, Wong elides the labor that her nanny performs by emphasizing how hard she and her husband have to work in order to pay her salary. The nanny is never allowed to manifest as a full-fledged, fleshy embodied character like Wong's pregnant friend who endured seventy-two hours of labor.

Sofiya is also strikingly omitted from Wong's 2019 best-selling book *Dear Girls: Intimate Tales, Untold Secrets, and Advice for Living Your Best Life*, a collection of hilarious, heartfelt letters addressed to her daughters. Despite the literary conceit Wong deploys, the actual target audience of the book is not Wong's still preschool-aged daughters but, rather, new mothers. For these reasons, this book seems like a missed opportunity for Wong to expand on her reliance on paid domestic help and thereby challenge the neoliberal ideology that underwrites the genre of mommy lit, which celebrates a singular, heroic maternal figure.[16] The only mention of the family's nanny occurs in the afterword written by Wong's husband, Justin Hakuta, who describes Sofiya as a "magical Ukrainian nanny" (213). The word "magical" serves to simultaneously mystify and trivialize the domestic labor Sofiya performs, which is not magic at all. Cringing at the occlusion and marginalization of the nanny opens up critical space for considering how the audience of Wong's comedy remains largely limited to a specific class of women with disposable income, Netflix accounts, and the leisure time to watch her shows. The nannies who are taking care of someone else's children (in order to send money back home to their families) are likely not able to listen to and laugh at Wong's jokes.

While Wong does not do justice to the nanny as a laboring body, her joke directs attention to the new regimes of exhaustion engendered by neoliberalism. Insofar as the nanny evokes the familiar narrative of a migrant domestic

[15] On the globalized care economy, see Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002).

[16] On the genre of mommy lit, see Arosteguy (2010).

worker who must toil far away from her own children, Wong updates that narrative of family separation. By emphasizing how she and her husband "have to work very hard to not take care of [their] child [themselves]," Wong points to how shifting conditions and imperatives to work under neoliberalism have also led to the fragmentation of privileged families in the United States. She additionally challenges dominant assumptions that those who rely on nanny labor are lazy, incompetent parents for passing off child-rearing responsibilities to someone else. Wong highlights the double bind in neoliberal capitalist America, where parents have to hustle all day in order to pay for a nanny whose labor will allow them to go to work in the first place. Under these conditions, Wong suggests, it is impossible *not* to neglect one's children—working long hours away emerges as an ironic requisite to (hire someone to) take care of one's children. While the conditions that compel the migrant domestic laborer and privileged parents in the United States to work away from their children are incommensurable, Wong points to how familial fragmentation serves as both an effect and means of expanding and driving the neoliberal economy.

Wong moves from her nanny bit to an explicitly racial joke about child care. She asserts: "I'm so jealous of Mexican people. Mexican culture. They don't need no nannies, 'cause you know who takes care of the baby? The other baby!" Here Wong relies on and perpetuates stereotypes of large Mexican families and hypersexual, hyperfertile Mexican women that might a elicit a cringe. As a disruptive bodily reflex, the cringe can move us to critically reflect on the neoliberal conditions that animate this joke in relation to Wong's other jokes about child care. We can understand Wong as rearticulating deviant Mexican hypersexuality in terms of reproduction and extended family formation as a means of surviving the increasing privatization of maternal and child welfare in the United States. For families that cannot afford to hire a nanny like Wong, having more children to take care of other children might be the only way to compensate for the structures of care that have been dismantled by the state. Here, Wong again redirects the cringe, a bodily gesture of turning inward, toward external systems of inequality. In this contemporary neoliberal moment, when subjects are compelled to relentlessly work and strive forward/upward, a politics and ethics of lying down might be the only viable means of surviving and resisting the pressures of structural violence.

A politics and ethics of lying down

In *Hard Knock Wife*, Wong reveals that when she and her husband role play, she requests that he call her "a simple ho." Her "greatest fantasy" is no longer to be a housewife, as she stated in her first Netflix comedy special,

but rather "an illiterate farm girl with no responsibility or decision-making power." The pleasure that Wong finds in assuming a position of extreme sexual passivity and powerlessness is cringey because it perpetuates stereotypes of deviant Asian female hypersexuality. As in her Mexican child care joke, however, Wong rearticulates hypersexuality in the context of the pressures of living under neoliberalism: "Being a woman and a breadwinner is not all that, okay? Because you get insecure . . . about having too much power, so you overcompensate in the marriage by letting the husband have a say and . . . on top of that, . . . I get very insecure about being seen as . . . an ice cold, workaholic mom, so then I'm the main caregiver of our daughter, too. And I'm exhausted!" Wong's assumption that the role of a simple ho will entail the least amount of physical and mental energy of course trivializes the often precarious and grueling conditions of labor that characterize the lives of actual sex workers. But what is resonant is the exhaustion that Wong conveys through this bit, which serves as one manifestation of what I have been calling a "politics and ethics of lying down." Wong's cringe comedy invites us to take seriously lying down not as a gesture of laziness, (sexual) passivity, or acquiescence but as a vital, reparative act for new mothers and working parents, not to mention the migrant domestic laborers and sex workers who participate in an affective economy that relegates them to the status of bodies not worth caring about.

It is important to note that Wong's jokes about her desire to lie down in *Baby Cobra* and *Hard Knock Wife* have been largely met with laughter and acceptance from mainstream audiences because she is literally standing up, performing the labor of comedy as well as the visible gestational labor of pregnancy. All evidence points to how Wong does lean in with gusto in both her professional and personal life. I read the contradiction between Wong's maternal model minority performance offstage and the politics and ethics of lying down she promotes through her comedy as not simply hypocrisy (i.e., not doing what she is preaching) but rather a sign of the gendered and racial constraints of cultural and economic citizenship for Asian American women in the contemporary moment. In *Baby Cobra*, Wong reflects, for example, on her pregnant embodiment: "It's very rare and unusual to see a female comic perform pregnant, because female comics . . . don't get pregnant. . . . Once they do get pregnant, they generally disappear." We can thus understand Wong's immediate return to the comedy circuit after the birth of her daughters as an effort to fight against her own disappearance in a competitive industry that continues to be dominated by white men. Yet comedy also paradoxically manifests as the site where Wong can challenge the Asian American model maternity role she has been compelled to perform. Her cringe humor and aesthetic, which embraces the lateral, from the gross,

horizontal excretion of poop and uterine tissue to the notion of lying down, offers us a glimpse of an anticipatory politics that cannot yet be realized but that minoritized subjects might want and need.

The act of lying down does not ostensibly contribute in a direct or meaningful way to the public goals of contemporary antiracist, feminist struggles. Yet we can contextualize lying down in relation to a tradition of women of color feminism that recognizes how the public work of organizing for social change can only be sustained by the private work of self-care. Audre Lorde (1988) famously wrote, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (132). While lying down entails a turn toward the individual that can lead one away from forms of collective struggle, it should not be simply reduced to a symptom of neoliberalism.[17] As Lorde explains, caring for the self becomes an act of warfare when the self is already under attack, when it is about finding a way to exist in world where your existence is not seen to matter. Along these lines, we can apprehend lying down as a radical form of self-care, a vital reparative practice that challenges increasingly hegemonic neoliberal discourses of self-help. Lying down can also engender the necessary slowdown for imagining more viable forms of antiracist, feminist agency and subjectivity. Wong indeed invites us to question whether there is any politics that does not produce exhausted bodies. Assuming and thinking from the horizontal position of the wasted female bodies that Wong invokes in her comedy—the professional wife and mother, the nanny, and the prostitute, whose exhaustion is compounded through the intersection of race and class, is a crucial step toward realizing more equitable and livable structures of relation.

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[17] As Sara Ahmed (2014) asserts: "Neoliberalism sweeps up too much when all forms of self-care become symptoms of neo-liberalism."

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