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Franny Choi's Criticisms of U.S. Capitalism and Imperialism in *Soft Science*

Unlike human beings, technology are inanimate tools created to be wielded and used. However, under capitalism, people too can be treated as if they were objects with the sole purpose of being controlled. Korean-American poet Franny Choi combines human nature with artificial, electronic characteristics to create a cyborg speaker that represents this struggle of being recognized as human. Using a human-cyborg speaker to represent the struggles of labor exploitation in her poetry collection *Soft Science*, Choi combines poetry and science fiction to describe the social inequalities faced by working class women of color. She thus reveals how social inequalities derive from U.S. capitalism and imperialism.

In her poetry, Choi discusses how labor is used to enact systematic violence, revealing how U.S. capitalism facilitates the brutality of imperialism. In the poem, "On the night of the election," the speaker asks the question:

is there anything that works
that isn't a machine for killing,
or doomed to collapse, or stolen
from the sweat of the hungry? (Choi 35-38)

She believes that “machines,” whether they represent technology or institutions, are only made possible by the exploitation of poor, working class people who she calls “the hungry.” The speaker also suggests that those in power only produces in order to hurt others. By implying that the fruits of labor in the U.S. are used to kill, she references overseas violence caused by American ambitions to establish international influence, explaining how the labor produced under capitalism makes imperialist violence possible. Choi revisits this theme in “You’re So Paranoid,” where she describes police as a “wall of men standing on my friends’ necks” (23). Choi portrays cops not as individual people but as one “wall” or body acting in unison, asserting that that the police are a militaristic institution enacting systematic violence against common people. Furthermore, the speaker’s description of police as “machines” (31) further emphasizes that the labor exploiting under capitalism is used to kill, reiterating that capitalism renders possible the unjustified violence against oppressed communities at the hands of U.S. rulers. In her pivotal essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, science and technology scholar Donna J. Haraway states, “The main trouble with cyborgs [...] is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism” (9). She believes that the cyborg, the idea of a being created to serve others, was manifested out of the desires to create profit and strengthen the power of the armed forces. Haraway’s ideas about the social implications of cyborgs has strongly influenced *Soft Science*, which is evident when Choi includes the Haraway quote that states, “We are excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body,” at the beginning of her poetry collection. Choi draws on Haraway’s connection between cyborgs and militarism by using a cyborg speaker in *Soft Science* that exposes how labor exploitation makes imperialist violence possible, asserting that U.S. capitalism and imperialism causes needless brutality.

By showing how the speaker's human-cyborg combination of a body is objectified, Choi demonstrates how U.S. capitalism and imperialism cause inequality by withholding workers' bodily autonomy. In "The Price of Rain," the speaker says:

I thought,
if I lay my legs on the altar, I thought something
would come back to me. Mine, mine. I offered it,
being promised rain (Choi 10-13)

The speaker describes herself sacrificing parts of her body for rain to water her crops, which represents having to give up freedom and control of one's own body in order to survive. Furthermore, in "Notes," Choi explains that a line from this poem misquotes the activist Cesar Chavez (93). According to Cathy Murphy, a former staff member of a labor union founded by Chavez, the activist fought for the rights of poor agricultural laborers (230). The reference to Chavez to describe a lack of self-rule over one's body is evidence that Choi is leading readers into a larger political idea about capitalism and its treatment of the bodies of workers. As she connects her feelings of lacking autonomy with the idea of labor exploitation, she argues that workers are dehumanized and abused for physical labor, which forces them to lose self-agency over their bodies. Similarly, in the poem "TURING TEST_PROBLEM SOLVING," the cyborg says, "have you ever tried to shake / your body / into obedience / tried to shake yourself / back into it" (9-10). The cyborg describes the obedience expected of her, since rather than being an autonomous individual, she is a machine whose sole purpose is to serve man. Choi connects the treatment of the cyborg to the experiences of working class people who are exploited for their labor to the point of losing autonomy over their own bodies. Like "The Price of Rain," this poem describes how capitalism violates self-agency of one's body. Additionally, Asian American studies scholar Lisa Lowe describes the working conditions of a Chinese woman in a factory,

stating that “the factory extracted surplus value [...] from using and manipulating her body itself from her eyes that strained [...], her throat that hurt [...], and her back that ached” (32). Lowe explains that when profiting off of the labor of the worker, the factory controlled and damaged her body. This is because the exploitation of labor requires the domination of the bodies of workers and the withholding of workers’ self-autonomy that Choi describes in her poetry. Based on Choi’s connection between imperialism and its dependence on exploited labor, *Soft Science* asserts that U.S. capitalism and imperialism infringe on the bodily autonomy of working-class people.

While portraying how U.S. rulers both enact violence as well as violate bodily autonomy throughout *Soft Science*, Choi also discusses how these effects of capitalism and imperialism disproportionately impact women of color. In the poem “Making Of,” the speaker says:

When a cyborg puts on a dress,
it’s called drag.

When a cyborg gets down
on her knees, it’s called

behavior. When a cyborg says *want*,
she’s barking (1-6).

While the cyborg humanizing herself is considered role-breaking, being deferential to man is normal. Choi’s use of feminine pronouns for the demonstrates how women in particular are dehumanized and treated like machines created to work for others. Although Choi describes how U.S. capitalism and imperialism can infringe on the self-agency of workers in general, she also shows how this can be especially harmful for female workers of color in *Soft Science*. Likewise, in “The Cyborg Wants to Make Sure She Heard You Right,” the speaker says, “Asian woman is

an object of sex” (9). This line represents how Asian women can be degraded and objectified sexually because of the intersection of their racial and gender identities. Similarly, Asian studies scholar Long Thanh Bui explains that corporations treat Asian women as “machine-like, disposable cyborgs without human needs or rights” (129), stating that “Orientalism applies...to all inferiorized groups that pose a civilizational alternative to Euro-American empire, demanding their enslavement and/or destruction” (131). In other words, Asian female workers being dehumanized into inanimate objects of labor derives from empires considering non-white people inferior. Their imperialistic desire to dominate other races and exploit their labor for profit has led women of color to continue to be dehumanized today due to current military actions and hunger for profit under capitalism. Both Bui and Choi thus establish how U.S. capitalism and imperialism subjugate working women of color due to race and gender.

In *Soft Science*, Choi demonstrates how her country enacts unjustified violence, infringes on bodily autonomy, and discriminates based on race and gender to create unequal classes of people in which women of color in the working class are dehumanized as if they were cyborgs. By combining human-like qualities with the imagery of an objectified, technological body, Choi effectively uses science fiction to help readers better understand the social effects of capitalism and imperialism. *Soft Science* is a testament to the importance of Cyborg literature and how it can help audiences recognize the dehumanizing systems that can exist in both the present and the future.

Works Cited

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