

# **PHANTASTIC FUTURITIES: TOWARDS A FLUID AESTHETICS OF DESIRE**

**AN AFFECTIVE QUEERING OF LI ANG'S SHORT STORY "CURVACEOUS DOLLS"**

By

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Submitted to

Central European University

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*In partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts in Gender Studies*

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*Budapest, Hungary*

2017

# Abstract

In this thesis I want to offer an affective reading of Li Ang 李昂 short story “Curvaceous Dolls” (“Yǒu qūxiàn de wáwa 有曲線的娃娃”) (1987). My project is motivated by a queer (kù’er 酷兒) movement that was already contesting the normalizing forces of the taxonomical model of identity in Taiwan since the 90’s. Following this kù’er discourse, I aim to challenge the homophobic reticent poetics that shrouds popular discourses towards LGBTQI people and usually co-opts queer literatures with the purpose of either normalizing its characters — albeit through abjection — or with that of portraying them as samples of the decadent values brought about by modernity. I demonstrate that departing from a skeptical stance regarding the usefulness of identity categories allows the reader to potentially engage in the interpretation of 80’s and 90’s Taiwan queer literatures from a position that can be used against the aforementioned aesthetical-ethical silent tolerance and its invisibilizing and degrading results.

“Curvaceous Dolls” is a Taiwanese fictional text that has been received in the English speaking world mostly as the tale of repressed lesbian desire assuming that such a labelling was a progressive move that would visibilize the character and give her a consistent significance. I consider that this story serves as a good reminder that actually, oppression usually starts in the apparatus through which meaning is acquired in a phallogocentric system. As I argue, the theoretical presupposition of her lesbianism has rendered the female character intelligible under an identity based model at the cost of making the reader blind to her fertile affective world. To avoid the constraining effects of identity categories I look at the 1997 edition of Howard Goldblatt’s English translation from 1986 through affect theory, psychoanalysis’ object-relations theory and French feminist philosophy. Through self-tailored concepts such as *semiotic discourse* and borrowing others such as “phantasy” — from Melanie Klein, who considers the concept encompasses ideas but also bodily feelings — my work shows that staying away from an understanding of identities as the materialization of patterns of desire and focusing instead in the character’s wishing experiences, their iterable affective components and their role in the character’s development is actually a more effective way to visibilize the protagonist and account for her agency. My contributions are thus twofold, first as a literary interpretation with the political purpose of challenging the normativizing identity-based model and also theoretical inasmuch as I bring biologicist and psychoanalyst views on subject formation into conversation under the rubric of the affective and the semiotic meaning. Eventually, this leads my argument to an understanding of “phantasy” as that which not only affects the development of the subject — the character in my textual analysis — due to its past affective experiences but more importantly, as something that enables her to imagine an alternative future based on them.

## **DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL RESEARCH AND THE WORD COUNT**

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 23,889 words

Entire manuscript: 26,788 words

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# Acknowledgements

A todos aquellos miopes del presente que desde su timidez intelectual han predicado a mi alrededor la vía del pragmático sometimiento. Aunque habéis imaginado un mundo que no merece ser vivido, es en la agonía de esas ficciones vuestras que nos asfixian el sentir donde crecen los monstruos. A los que de una forma u otra habéis sabido alimentarlos con las historias, los afectos y los sinsentidos que animan hoy mi esperpéntica marcha, sabed que el futuro ya desborda las ilusiones del pasado, gracias.

Sincere thanks go to my advisors Eszter Timár and Vera Eliasova for providing the intellectual stimuli that has allowed this thesis; and to Andrea Kirchknopf, without whom you would not be able to understand my thoughts in written form.

To everyone else who has contributed with their always sparkling thoughts and company to make this experience even better, thank you: Bea, Nora, Olia, Bianca, Anna...

最後，我想特別感謝臺灣的朋友們翻譯上的協助，使我能徜徉在性別研究，這五彩繽紛的世界。

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## Introduction

Li Ang's 李昂 short story "Curvaceous Dolls" ("Yǒu qūxiàn de wáwá 有曲線的娃娃") (1987) has been usually read as the tale of a repressed lesbian desire, highlighting the author's ability to write about taboo.<sup>1</sup> Although this story is often used to create a narrative of gradual development towards a full disclosure of lesbianism in Li Ang's oeuvre,<sup>2</sup> I suggest that this reading is more telling of a need to unveil and name from the side of the translator and reader than from Li Ang's herself, who never provided a definite interpretation for this story. As I will argue, this catalogization of the character's development as a case of repressed lesbian desire, instead of being a progressive move from the side of the English readership, reinforces a discourse on sexuality as integral to the individual's identity that was already being contested in Taiwan in the 90's.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the queer (kù'ér 酷兒) discourse that was emerging in the island, in the English renditions and reviews of this Taiwanese short story, like in the translation by Prof. Howard Golblatt (1986) contained in the 1997 compilation of Li Ang stories that I am using for my thesis, it's easy to encounter a recurrent wish on the side of the editor, translator and reader to find in Li Ang's text the tale of repressed lesbian desire. I will argue that, funnily enough, the English speaking readership is being prey to the same restrictive symbolic world that constrains the development of the female character in the story. To oppose it, I propose an alternative reading of the character for which I will resort to the conceptual toolkit offered by

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1 This is a description found in many sources such as Yenna Wu's *Li Ang's Visionary Challenges to Gender, Sex, and Politics* (2014) and other literary critics like Steven Beattie's entry in his blog *That Shakespearean Rag* May 31, 2015, <http://www.stevenwbeattie.com/?cat=665>

2 Yenna Wu talks about an "incipient lesbianism" that can be detected in the story, (Wu 2014, 11).

3 In April 1994 the Taiwanese magazine *Isle-Margins* (*Dǎoyǔ Biānyuán* 島嶼邊緣) published an issue devoted to explaining the queer (kù'ér 酷兒) to the Sinophone readers in which the first translation of the term appeared. See: Lim, "How to be queer in Taiwan" and "Queer Theory goes to Taiwan" for more on the translated character of the term and its history.

affect theory, object relations theory and French feminist theory. I believe that the vocabulary provided by these three schools of thought allows to account for an interpretation that gives credit to the female protagonist's experience without compulsorily imposing on her any further categorical presumptions. My goal is therefore to open a space for a form of critical engagement with world literatures that does not necessarily depart from any stable and normalizing structure of sexual identities.

This project is particularly important in the Taiwanese literary context of the 80's and 90's because of the social consequences that the use of specific interpretations of this literary past have in social discourse. The historical moment to which Li Ang's text belongs coincides with the emergence of *tóngzhì* 同志 (literally 'comrade' but commonly used to mean 'gay') literature in the island, a time when Taiwanese and Japanese literatures "proceed through the creation of literary dystopias, which challenge the truth-claims of the myth of progress propagated by the establishment by presenting stylized portraits of difference or dysfunction" (Hillenbrand 2007, 61). Blatantly queer characters and situations written back then are being interpreted as either an example of the ways in which Western progressiveness degenerated Taiwanese traditional values or through a lens that tries to normalize and incorporate non-normative desires into taxonomies of identity politics. For the sake of clarification I will provide a couple of examples of this phenomenon I am referring to. The first one is the interpretation of *Crystal Boys* (*Nièzi* 孽子) (1983) that appears in its author's biography by Wang Jimin 王晉民 (1992). In this biographical account of the celebrated writer and LGBTQI advocate Bai Xianyong 白先勇, the author completely disregards the role of homosexual desire, prostitution and the cruising scene in the novel to favor an explanation of the characters' abnormal behavior that resorts to their trauma for lacking a father figure. The other example is Huang Yuxiu's 黃毓秀 magazine article (1993) about the internationally

acclaimed film *Wedding Banquet* (*Xǐyàn* 喜宴) (1993). This text shows the author's concern on *Wedding Banquet* being read as the story of a gay man that navigates his sexuality to finally abide by his filial duties towards his family and get married; an interpretation that ultimately portrays his homosexuality as a burden in the attainment of his true goal and main drive of the argument: performing filial piety.

As this shows, literature, which could be a visibilizing tool for non-normative desires can easily be turned into yet another normalizing device if alternative readings to the normativization of queer characters and situations are not provided. Therefore, I believe it would not be fair to, from the West, retroactively impose upon any seemingly queer or dysfunctional character we may find in Taiwanese literature yet another category embedded in the rhetoric of progress just to avoid facing the challenge of analyzing them from a different perspective. If the effort has been made to read the gang of homosexual prostitutes of *Crystal Boys* as children yearning for their missing father and Li Ang's character has been rendered as a repressed lesbian without needing her to ever express her sexual interest in women, it should not sound too queer to propose reading them from an affective perspective and with the upfront political purpose of challenging the assumed progressiveness that accompanies identity politics' truth claims. Failing to provide alternative forms of reading Li Ang's "Curvaceous Dolls" would mean that her female protagonist will remain a lesbian, an abjected subject that serves the purpose of sustaining an almost inviolable mechanism of meaning production that in the context of Taiwanese literature is ultimately complicit with a homophobic reticent poetics that turns *coming out* into *putting out* (of visibility)<sup>4</sup> and can easily be co-opted to exemplify the decadence that progress has brought to traditional Taiwanese values.

4 Ji Ta-wei 紀大偉 (2014) shows the invisibilizing results of the homosexual character's *coming out* in a recent discussion on *Cicada* (*Chán* 蟬) and *Crystal Boys* (*Nièzi* 孽子).



Being aware of the problems that advocating for an alternative to the common understanding of sexuality as a fixed identity may entail, I want to state that I do not intend to push Taiwanese LGBTQI subjects into the shadows. Neither do I necessarily argue for an abandonment of sexual identities. Instead, my purpose is to challenge the aforementioned reticent poetics that Liu Renpeng 劉人鵬 and Ding Naifei 丁乃非 (2005) skillfully found were maintaining Taiwan immersed in a shadowy homophobic discourse disguised as discreet tolerance and look into the sites of penumbra within these politics.

Liu Renpeng and Ding Naifei influential article “Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics” (2005)<sup>5</sup> draws from Zhuangzi’s philosophical writings to contribute with the concept of penumbra that I find so fruitful for my thesis. In their text, they argue that the dominant aesthetic-ethical regime in Taiwan is that of a reticent tolerance that maintains queer subjects in the shadows and silences them. Penumbra, as the “slight shade outlining shadow” is the place where shadow meets light, it lacks substance and can’t be outlined, so it can only be known in relation to shadow. In Zhuangzi’s fable, penumbra and shadow engage in a conversation in which the former asks the latter about its independence to act. However, shadow can only respond by referring to its substance. Shadow’s discourse, that takes form-substance as its departing point does not suffice to account for penumbra’s existence, who lacks substance. I understand that, through this metaphor, the authors want to claim that the current discourse for sexualities in Taiwan lacks the very means through which it could account for subjects that don’t fully fit in the progressive identity-based discourse and by not addressing them or by *materializing* them using the available normative categories, they are being complicit with the reticent shadowy homophobic forces of traditional Taiwanese culture. The solution they

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5 The original Chinese version of the article dates back from 1998: Liu, Renpeng 劉人鵬 and Ding, Naifei 丁乃非, “Wǎng Liǎng Wèn Jǐng: Hányù Měixué Yǔ Kù’er Zhènglüè 罔兩問景：含蓄美學與酷兒政略 (Penumbrae Query Shadow: Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics).”

propose and the line of thought I want to implement along my writing aims to stop the silent tolerance that accompanies uncritical naming under an already sanctioned identity catalogue and instead, look into the penumbra and how its mere existence and queries trouble shadow's certainties to openly queer the normative discourse.

By resorting to the category of lesbianism, Western literary critics have given Li Ang's character a (repressed) identity. I think that this interpretation, although logical and most likely with a visibilizing purpose, fails to address the bountiful inner life of the character, whose agency seems to be sacrificed for the purpose of making her behaviors understandable under a system that favors the hetero/homo, repressed/emancipated conventional dichotomies. Taking into account what Diana Fuss named "the inside/outside dialectic"; by which sexual possibilities outside the hetero/homo dichotomy are just unthinkable and in which the homo is defined only in opposition to the hetero, as that which is outside the pure and natural heterosexual inside (Fuss 1991, 1-12), doesn't seem coincidental to me that the homosexual character in this story happens to be the one who is also alienated and abjected. Actually, this pattern is applicable to other works produced in the early moments of queer literature already from the late 70's such as the already mentioned *Crystal Boys* or *Cicada* (*Chán 蟬*) (1973), which shows that homosexuality and abjection seem to be indispensable to each other in the Taiwanese literature of this period. This portrayal of non-normative desire that conflates homosexuality with abjection and vice-versa, apart from working towards the incorporation — albeit through abjection — of non-conforming desires into the heteronorm and potentially support a homophobic conservative discourse, it also serves a more overarching purpose: that of strengthening the heterosexual mind that cannot conceive identity and desire as changeable, lest the stability and purity of his own heterosexuality may be contested.

Following some remarks made to me by Hong Ling 洪凌, also known as Lucifer Hung — one of the translators-cum-editors of the first queer publication in Taiwan (published in the magazine *Isle-Margins*) — my thesis objective “would be [to explore and develop] playful tactics to dismantle many assumptions on given sex, sexual and gender expressions, and [provide an alternative to the] dissatisfaction on the normalized Les/Bi/Gay agenda which was emergent at that time as semi-dominant discourse joining a progressive and ‘civilized’ first world army that seriously ignored many minority politics and positions”.<sup>6</sup> Following this comment, I will aim to challenge a reading of “Curvaceous Dolls” that, as I believe, presupposes the meaning of the fantastic and ever changing yearnings of the female protagonist and tries to ossify them into an identity category.

Apart from offering a new interpretation of “Curvaceous Dolls”, the theoretical framework developed in the first section of this thesis may be useful for theoretical discussions on identity formation, subjectifying processes and feminist psychoanalysis. The dialogue in which I intend to bring the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein and the psychologist Silvan Tomkins will provide two major theoretical outputs. The first of them will be a new sort of middle-of-the-road path to avoid the dead-end debate between biology versus culture when it comes to discussions on subject formation. In this regard, I will argue that affect, as a somatic experience of the body whose meaning is always already embedded in culture, presents an alternative way to understanding the internalization of social structures by the embodied subject. I understand this as contributing to the search for alternatives to a biology-centered psychoanalytical model that has been historically so important for feminist thinkers such as Nancy Chodorow, who already found Klein’s object relations theory productive for her emancipatory purposes (Doane and Hodges 1992, 33-52). Klein is useful in this regard for

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6 Personal communication with the author in August 2015.

having theorized the ways in which external objects become part of the self by projection or introjection, a process of symbolization undertaken by a mental activity she calls “phantasy” that creates a repertoire through which to interpret the world. The reason for using her concept of phantasy instead of Freud’s is that, as some scholars have pointed out, her theory on phantasy combines both ideas and feelings, whereas Freud never resolved the role of feelings in the concept (Spillius 2001). Having this in mind, my contribution to the understanding of phantasy will be that the female character makes use of it not only to re-present and interpret her world but eventually, also to imagine a different future for herself.

Following up on the importance of feelings for Klein’s theory on phantasy, I will dig into the role of affects in the process of subject formation. For this purpose, I draw on Tomkins theorization, particularly on his writings on shame and disgust and the way in which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995) introduced it as a valid paradigm for the humanities. The purpose of using Tomkins’ work on affect will be to advocate for the importance of looking at agency when producing feminist critics to psychoanalysis and provide a way to do so. I find affect theory on shame and disgust productive in this regard because through these two affects, Tomkins claimed that it is not only the subject who, according to unconscious drives — as the psychoanalytical model would assert — internalizes the external world and makes her phantasy out of it. Contrarily, Tomkins showed that affects actually play an integral role in subject formation and the fact that certain affective charges can be projected into one subject by another one — via disgust, for instance — makes necessary to switch *internalization* for *imposition* in order to give full account of the agential space available and the power relations that mediate the process of subjectification and phantasy formation.

Taking a step away from psychoanalysis' drive system to favor an affective system has also the benefit of allowing a broader, more nuanced theorization of the relationship of the subject with the world and the ways in which they interrelate. As Adam Frank argues, these two systems are distinguishable by way of the variety of freedoms they allow; "of time, of intensity, of density, of combination, and, most significantly, of object." (Frank 2015, 5). The fact that affects allow for an almost complete freedom regarding object choice is what I find most productive for my argument. Thus, I will appeal to Frank's interpretation of the freedom of object choice in Tomkins to claim that the object of disgust could be anything and therefore the rather structuralist paradigm of psychoanalysis' drives needs to be complicated. The object and the affect that attaches to it are not related in the same way the drive is linked to its object. Oppositely, affects and their objects are independent from each other while they might however create a fiction of inherent unity. For instance, as it happens in the story, sometimes the disgusting object may be depicted as source of disgust in a way that portrays it as if disgust were an inherent quality within it, whereas the potential changeability of disgust's object proves it to be otherwise. To unravel this complexity I am resorting to Julia Kristeva's theory on significance [*signifiance*] (Kristeva 1984, 17) and the pair of concepts: "signified" and "signifier", which I think will enable me to talk about the introjected object of the affect (the signifier) in a separate way from the meaning of the affect (the signified) that is located onto the object. There is a difference between projecting disgust into a signified or into a signifier that I will be discussing in my analysis of the text also through Kristeva's work on abjection (Kristeva 1982); a theorization by Kristeva that I will also incorporate when discussing the female character's process of subjectification.

In all, I believe that by putting into conversation affect theory and psychoanalytical perspectives regarding subject formation I am contributing with a lens through which to read

potentially queer literatures without having to impose on them any of the already existing sexual categories. A theoretical engagement with Klein's phantasy through affect theory and Kristeva's ideas on the semiotic-symbolic division of signification provides with a conceptual framework that allows an understanding of how the subject makes the world intelligible and more importantly, how she imagines futures within it. This return of agency to the character and the visibilization of her embodied experiences is a particularly important project in postcolonial contexts such as Taiwan, where the transnational flow of ideas not only engendered an identity-based framework for subjects' intelligibility, but also a counter-discourse critical with its normalizing consequences that is still in need of queer critical readings to support the challenge they pose to the norm.

# 1 | Theoretical framework: Tomkins, Kristeva and Klein

The following is a threefold conversation between Silvan Tomkins' affective system, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection and her take on Lacan's process of signification, and Melanie Klein's object relations theory and the concept of phantasy. The purpose of it is to connect the psychobiologist view of affects with their biological characteristics by dividing them in their semiotic and symbolic realities. This is an approach that I believe can potentially offer a theoretical framework to understand the process through which the subject is signified from a point of view that does not reduce its findings to a material pre-wired system of affects nor to an immaterial linguistic explanation. This kind of approach is shared by other scholars such as Sara Ahmed, who would also agree in saying that understanding affects through a psychoanalytical approach allows us to think about the affective as productive of individual and collective identities (Ahmed 2004, 100). Along the following pages I will argue that the result produced by the workings of the affective is fluid and can't be conceived only as an already consolidated identity. Psychoanalytical accounts have proved themselves useful in seeking for a theorization of the subject that is not a self-transparent unit. Particularly productive for my argument will be Kristeva's work, which already theorized a subject that is "no longer considered a phenomenological transcendental ego nor the Cartesian ego but rather, a subject in process/on trial [*sujet en procès*]" (Kristeva 1984, 37). This view is very much in line with the subject that I argue emerges from an affective reading of Li Ang's text "Curvaceous Dolls".

## 1.1 | Signifying the subject through the affective system

A reading of Kristeva's work shows that for her, in the process of signification of the subject there are two modes of meaning creation at play: the semiotic and the symbolic, being the latter where repression occurs. These two are interrelated and are both necessary in the process of signification (Kristeva 1984, 92-93). The semiotic would stand for the indefinable, the non-cognized and the pre-symbolic (Kristeva 1984, 95). Although, as prior to the symbolic, it can't signify, it is however capable of a sort of psychosomatic meaning that stems from the semiotic chora (Kristeva 1984, 94-96). Accordingly, the semiotic chora would be the site where the non-cognized pre-symbolic drive dwells:

Discrete quantities of *energy* move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of this development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body —always already involved in a semiotic process— [...]. In this way, the drives, which are 'energy' charges as well as psychical marks, articulate what we call a chora. (Kristeva 1984, 25)

In this excerpt it is visible that Kristeva theorizes a communication between the semiotic and the symbolic without resorting to drive's mono-causality. In the citation, chora is a term that denotes a space which is not yet symbolic but that however, plays a role in the creation of a blueprint for the subject. As McAfee notes, for Kristeva, this is a site that contains a pre-linguistic emotional subjectivity that is situated in the body (McAfee 2004, 18-22), this semiotic nature of the chora will be one of the connecting points I suggest between Kristeva and Tomkins.

The other side of signification Kristeva explains is the symbolic: a rupture — which she calls "the thetic phase" (Kristeva 1984, 98) — that retrospectively, enables the semiotic chora to



articulate itself (Kristeva 1984, 118). The symbolic is therefore that which enables the semiotic impulses to be cognized in terms of “subject” and “object” (Kristeva 1984, 129). It also allows the subject to understand and be understood in a logical way, establishing identifications and following the rules of propositionality (Kristeva 1984, 98). As I will argue, this intelligibility asks for temporal and objectal consistency;<sup>7</sup> a need that affect theory also accounts for. As Nathanson points out when prefacing Tomkins’ theory, Tomkins considered that past affective experiences play a role in subject formation (Nathanson 2008, xxi, xxii). This trait is also visible in the work of other scholars informed by Tomkins that also understood that in his affect theory, previous experiences of shame would condition the subject’s future behavior when faced with a similar situation (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 141, 142). Psychoanalysis considered this too; Klein’s concept of phantasy — which will be developed in the last section of this chapter — also reserves a space for the role of past experiences in the development of the subject, inasmuch as they will affect the way the subject makes sense of the external world. However, Tomkins’ affect theory and Klein’s phantasy don’t go further from saying that the past affects the ways in which the subject makes her present understandable through past experiences, whereas the goal of my thesis is to unravel the ways in which this acquiring of meaningful experiences might happen and take the concept of phantasy further, to turn it into not only something that allows an affected unfolding of the present but also something that can enable the subject to produce an imagination of the future.

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<sup>7</sup> Temporal and gender consistency on the object of desire is also the focus of Hemmings’ (2002) investigations. She argues that an identity template that departs from this assumption of consistency on the object of desire as its defining point unfolds a very restrictive structure for the desiring subject. In her research, she focuses on the dangers that naturalizing narrow theoretical claims on sexual identity has for the understanding of bisexuality. According to her, this way of creating an identity regulatory framework that doesn’t account for bisexuals, actually deprive them from social visibility and the chances to make rights claims.

As I have been announcing, Tomkins' conceptualization of affects as physiological mechanisms, their possibly self-reflective character and their key role in identity formation comes handy to complicate the traditional psychoanalytical theorization of the subject as moved and produced by drives. For Tomkins, "the critical element of the mind" is of a primitive nature, and therefore, he studied the face as "the receptor site" and the "display board" for what he named "the affect system", a system responsible of the most important functions in life that comprises nine innate affects divided in "positive" or "negative" depending on how they are felt (Nathanson 2008 xii, xiii). The affects in the latter group were subsequently classified as "auxiliary" if they served to secure survival or protection (Nathanson 2008, xiii). Auxiliary negative affects — those whose goal is to impede or warn against the possibility of discontinuation of a joy/pleasure that supports survival — are particularly important in the process of subjectification, and Tomkins actually classified them in "weak" and "strong" affect theories in relation to their efficiency in this regard (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 165-168). The significance of these affects would be that they are the ones in charge of managing our interactions with the external other and therefore, the ones triggering the process of individuation of the self against it. In this theory of affects, affects cannot signify by themselves, they are a sort of evolved ability to open the subject to the constant flow of information that comes in the form of "touch, sound, heat, light" and that needs to be stored, retrieved and made sense of for the subject to survive (Nathanson 2008. xiii). According to this, affects seem to convey the somatic experience until its cognized, to amplify the significance of an event, or point to something that requires attention, but they don't impose how to react to the external stimuli (Nathanson 2008 xxii, xiii). They can however magnify the meaning of similar scenes that have been repeated over time in order to produce a

plot and prepare the subject for the expected affective response should a similar scene take place again (Nathanson 2008 xxi, xxii).

This sort of memory that gives cohesive meaning to events is what Tomkins called “script theory” (Nathanson 2008, xxi). However, in Tomkins’ theory the script of an event only gets stored in memory if it is consciously represented (Nathanson 2008, xxi), something that would deny the semiotic meaning I want to argue for.

Like Kristeva’s semiotic, although affects are needed to trigger signification, they alone cannot give significance to an event, they need to engage with other systems (Nathanson 2008, xiii). Such is the case with contempt-disgust, that can provoke anger, fear, distress or shame in its receptor (Sedgwick and Frank 1995,157). I want to suggest that, following Kristeva, the affective system, by its mere openness to the constant reception of stimuli, may be capable of a semiotic meaning that, although cannot reach significance in its fullest form, retains the somatic, pre-symbolic characteristics of the event. In the following lines I propose that the affinities between Kristeva and Tomkins’ theories allow conceiving this psychosomatic way of creating meaning as facilitated by the affective system: the built-in structure that the average human uses to receive external stimuli. I am suggesting that the semiotic realm of signification has some points in common with the affective system, and my argument is grounded in the hypothesis that there is a semiotic way of meaning formation allowed by the existence of this affective system.

One of the main shared considerations of these two schools of thought is the phenomenology with which they work. In Kristeva’s texts, subjectification occurs when the semiotic is discharged into the symbolic (McAfee 2004, 23) being the former the condition of emergence of the latter, which implies a phenomenological paradigm in which the semiotic precedes the

entering into the symbolic (McAfee 2004, 24). Based on this, the conscious stable subject emerges as the unit resulting from the discharge of semiotic pulses into the symbolic, which imposes a sign in them to make them intelligible and thereby turns them into the subjects — in the grammatical sense — of future similar experiences. In conclusion, the semiotic, although prior to the symbolic, is only rendered intelligible or cognizable after traversing the symbolic. I find Tomkins' affect theory similar in this regard, since it also supports this phenomenology when it comes to affects. In Tomkins' texts, although affects can be self-reflexive (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 136) — which signals the possibility for an affect to be cognized by the subject — they, and the affect system as a whole, are prior to whatever it is that allows their cognition and intelligibility. They are a visceral impulse pre-wired in the body that triggers a sense of self-awareness that subsequently, conditions the development of the subject (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 141). Because Tomkins departs from an understanding of affects as a biological mechanism — which I understand as pre-discursive — contrasting his theory to the psychoanalytical paradigm is also helpful to wonder about the fair recurrent criticism on the unconscious as being already structured by cultural signifiers and therefore, as not productive as a source of resistance against the symbolic.

A rough point of departure for my argument would be that both Kristeva and Tomkins understand the process of subjectivation as a communication — allowed by the affective system — between an embodied semiotic self and an external othered object that is understood as consolidated and atemporal. Since the external object to which any taken affect is attached is considered in these terms and holds a responsibility in the development of the subject — as I will show in detail when discussing abjection and object relations theory — it is not only a consolidated object but, inasmuch as it performs a boundary for it to be so, it is also consolidating for the subject that introjects it in these same terms of fixation and

consolidation of the real, material world. Actually, this model of subject formation is in fact not based in a communicative system but, as Sedgwick and Frank sensed, in a feedback system instead (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 36). Much of my thesis will be occupied pointing at the nuances that the affective adds to the logic of the feedback and to the psychoanalytic conception of the body as *driven* by desire, as if the semiotic was not only prior but also independent of the symbolic.

Because of its potential to trouble the aforementioned phenomenology and any neat inside/outside division between the semiotic self and the social body, the self-reflective quality of the affect shame and the fact that it can be provoked by an external other via contempt-disgust (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 157) is what I find most useful for my argument here. Also, both contempt-disgust and shame are key affects in the process of abjection happening in the short story that I aim to analyze.

## 1.2 | The subjectifying role of affect: a semiotic meaning

Reading Tomkins and Kristeva together shows that affects work as a communicative force between an embodied semiotic self and the symbolic or the social. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, the phenomenology of this communicative force resembles a feedback system. I suggest that it would be a reductionist understanding of both Tomkins and Kristeva to say that the affective force of the semiotic is propelled into external objects and thereby, they acquire the meaning that would play a role in subjectification. The clearest example to illustrate my suggestion is that of the affect shame because, as the authors I'm using noted on Tomkins: "Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost" (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 136). As shown, for Tomkins it would not be accurate to say that shame resides in an external object. Instead, the meaning

of the experience of feeling shame is brought up in the circulation of affect that takes place between the subject with herself and the external. This is why I propose an understanding of the interrelations between Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic realms from the perspective of this performative character of affects, which conditions subjectification and blurs the ontological truth of both the object and the subject.

Wondering about the phenomenology of affects from a psychoanalytical perspective makes it necessary to first, state the differences between affects and drives as subjectifying forces. As Nathanson notes, for Tomkins "innate affects" are "psychological mechanisms" that "amplify" the workings of drives (Nathanson 2008, xiv). Affects also differ from drives in the fact that they have multi-causal triggers and do not respond to the linear explanation that binds need to object in the psychoanalytical paradigm of the drive that I will discuss more in depth later (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 54, 55). In all, it seems that the affective system, although an embodied network itself, helps giving a cognized meaning to the otherwise only visceral drives that are propelled to the outside from the semiotic. Differently from the symbolic, which only names the raw semiotic drive to put it in circulation in an intelligible way — and thereby control it — I see that the affective allows for a form of meaning production that, since it's grounded in the body, can combine the cognized significance of an event with the somatic or emotional charge attached to it. This is why I will suggest that, by appealing to the more somatic components of an affective event — to its more semiotic qualities if I may — the process of signification can be altered by accessing its pre-symbolic remnants and therefore, new significations might be allowed. Hence new possibilities for experiencing the present and imagine the future would be possible too.

As I already laid out in the previous section, the semiotic chora would be the site where the non-cognized and the pre-symbolic is located and actually, I don't need to depart much from Kristeva's writings to argue that the productive communication between the semiotic and the symbolic, in the case of affects, would not follow the subject-object direction of the drive:

Though deprived of unity, identity or deity, the chora is nevertheless subject to a regulating process which is different from that of symbolic law but nevertheless effectuates discontinuities by temporarily articulating them and then starting over, again and again. (Kristeva 1984, 26)

Following her words, my proposal is that the "energies" Kristeva mentions are enabled to circulate by means of the affective system. The bodily ability to experience affects independently of the symbolic would be the structure that Kristeva sees as regulating the semiotic chora. Therefore, I arrive to the conclusion that, although the chora is not sign neither signifier (Kristeva 1984, 26), it is nevertheless subject to a symbolic regulation through the signified quality of the affective: a semiotic meaning. This would pose a major difference between Kristeva's energies and the psychoanalytic term drive, because the former would be conceived as already acted upon by the external, always available for its "temporarily articulating" through the affective system. The semiotic discharges that are regulated by the symbolic in Kristeva's theory of signification are not a neutral impulse like the drive. Instead, they stem from the semiotic chora — the pre-symbolic and pre-cognized — and I suggest, can be conceived as acquiring a particular semiotic meaning through temporal consistency. This way, a subject that is recurrently put through shameful experiences in a sort of a repetitive pattern would develop a more intense meaning for shame than the by-default shame the average subject feels. This is how I see that the external, by prompting recurrent affective stimuli on the subject can alter the semiotic meaning of certain events at least in

terms of their “intensity”.<sup>8</sup> According to this, I am conceiving a semiotic chora that is immersed in a world of potentiality with the ability to be penetrated by stimuli and respond to them; affects being this ability of the subject to respond to stimuli. These affective forces would acquire their meaning by circulating between the subject and the other/object, through contact with the symbolic. This would make difficult to talk about an innate shame and instead, I would rather speak about an innate ability to process this formative affective experience in the semiotic.

The encounter between the semiotic and the external other that I’m sketching here would stimulate the former to enter the symbolic as a means to reach and delimit the boundaries of the division self/other. The process of signification of the subject takes place through the projection and introjection of the external and internal objects into or out to the self, a movement that I argue, can be affected by abjection, which can be subsequently propelled by shame and the display of disgust.

### **1.3 | The abject: /non/object of shame**

For both affective and psychoanalytic approaches, the subject is sustained or emerges, in a sort of rupture, either in an encounter with the other that is rejected and inscribed in the self through the workings of shame-humiliation (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 141, 142), or through a schism between the semiotic and the symbolic that happens when the subject enters language (McAfee 2004, 37, 38). Nevertheless, my suggestion is that in both cases the subject’s future is conditioned and made in discursive practices enabled by the semiotic.

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<sup>8</sup> “Intensity” is the concept used by Sedgwick and Frank to measure the different flavors of a shameful event without taking the object as referent, a usage I find suitable for my thesis ( Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 133, 134).



To draw a comparison of Tomkins' theory with psychoanalytic accounts of the process of becoming from the perspective of the object is interesting because of the fact that both theories require the figure of the object as source of joy/pleasure or to trigger the semiotic/symbolic rupture (Sedgwick and Frank 153-165; Kristeva 1982, 2-6). Somehow, the subject is secondary to — or the product of the encounter with — the external object which again, is considered as already consolidated. Affects, by bringing awareness to the self-reflexive relationship of the object with the subject allow an understanding of the object, and therefore of the subject too, as in a constant interrelated process of formation that can't be said to reach consolidation. The object that is thought of within this self-reflexive relationship can be conceived as an abstracted figure circulated within the subject. The subject that in contact with the othered object becomes aware of herself does so convinced by the fiction created by her own self-reflexion, sensing herself and the object as both having a stable status of consolidation. In Tomkins' affect theory this would happen in the self-reflexive loop that is inaugurated when the subject encounters an object onto which she is compelled to place her interest. I suggest that, if disgust is projected into this subject-object pleasurable relationship, it breaks it and invests it with a new external meaning: that of shame. The relationship between the subject with that object would thereafter be charged also with the meaning of shame. In Tomkins, "the same positive affect which ties the self to the object also ties the self to shame" (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 138). Following this line of thought, although I have already mentioned that for Tomkins affects such as shame can be self-reflexive however, I propose that this self-reflexive experience seems to nevertheless still require a contrast with the other to be triggered, an external trigger to start, and therefore, it would carry a meaning that is not only of the subject and the object. Moreover, I suggest taking the object as the temporary site

of the positive or the negative affect, an affect that nevertheless is tangible only after being placed onto an object that will subsequently be introjected.

This logic is compatible with Kristeva's figure of the abject, which is a figure that floats between the self and the other defining the boundaries of the subject in the terms of that which is rejected and paradoxically, also incorporated to the "I" (Kristeva 1982, 3). According to the following quote, for Kristeva, abjection as a necessary process for the subject to make sense of herself and the world — to signify — resembles an assemblage of non-objects rather than an object or a consolidated unit of reality that can be referred to under the rules of logocentrism: "When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable object. The abject is not an object facing me, which I name or imagine" (Kristeva 1982, 1). Kristeva's abjection is located within the subject inasmuch as it provides her with the very foundations of her becoming. In this inner subjective world, the abject — like the self-reflexive loop of shame — lacks a consolidated object — consolidated understood as objective and consistent — that would trigger the process of signification. It requires, and so does shame, to be propelled by an external event such as disgust into the subject, who then starts within herself the self-reflexive loop mentioned above; the introjection of the abjected. Since I'm suggesting that this subjectifying process is not inaugurated by anything understandable as a consolidated object or subject but rather by a fluid encounter between both that is already immersed in other forms of (semiotic) meaning — as it is for instance the meaning that a display of disgust conveys and which preempts the emergence of shame or abjection — neither object nor subject should be understood in terms of consolidation. To assist me in the analysis of this subjective inner world of introjected objects, I will differentiate two layers of meaning that are incorporated to the self in the introjection that shame and abjection entail: that of the

cognizable object and that of the felt affective event. To do so, I will use Kristeva's concepts: signified to refer to the introjected semiotic meaning of the event regardless of its symbolic, object or material reality; and signifier to point to the symbolic, object or material reality regardless of the surrounding semiotic meaning in which the introjection took place. Based on this, I suggest that the subjectifying process inaugurated by abjection or by the self-reflexive loop of shame is not so much in response of an encounter with a particular signifier. My view is that this encounter signals the emergence of a signified without an object. This signified without signifier that is the abject would become attached to the self through the affective system. Tomkins' example of the kid that covers his face when confronted by something that produces shame in him while also leaves some space between his fingers to maintain contact with the object-source of shame might be illustrative (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 137). The pertinent question in this example would not be what is that object — as a signifier — but rather, how that object became a source of shame — how a particular assemblage of affective meaning got attached to it. That object, in acting as signifier, is not a source of shame per se and when it is seen as such by the kid, what is being intensified is the shameful signified, the abjected meaning that once became attached to that object. This would be the case when someone is ashamed for doing something she did not consider shameful. The signified shame would be attached to that practice and placed in an object which then, would act as a signifier and collaborate in constructing an imagined space for shame within the subject that I will, borrowing Klein's term, call phantasy.

## **1.4 | A floating signified: the unfolding of an unfixed identity**

As noted by other scholars, the idea of a past experience that conditions the future is also present in Tomkins (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 141, 142). For him, the first product of shame

is the creation of a sense of judgement in our selves, something that has the ability, due to past experiences, to assess how likely it is that any taken event may force us to get closer to feeling shame. Tomkins' idea of self-awareness does not seem to require any theoretical notion of a pre-discursive inner realm like the semiotic chora, because for him, it is the introjection of shame what inaugurates the emergence of the subject that will afterwards self-reflexively circulate this affect. The source of the self-reflexive loop is external to the self and performs a signification when it's introjected. A signification that, as I previously mentioned, can be understood as twofold: on the one hand as the introjection of the object in which disgust has been projected to make it stand for shame — the signifier; and on the other, as the semiotic meaning in which that object was immersed, what I have previously refer to as the affective assemblage of non-objects that, although unable to signify by themselves alone, still carry a semiotic meaning — this is what I will call the signified in the process of signification that shame inaugurates for the subject. In psychoanalytical terms, this self-judgement that I am discussing as prompted by shame into the self can be equated with the super ego, and the place opposed to the "I" that does not want to feel shame would lead again to the abject (Kristeva 1982, 1, 2).

In phenomenological terms, I am proposing that the self that puts shame at work is not prior to it, but in constant becoming through it — it is therefore a subject that is being performed and requires a certain iteration. So it is the case with the abject, that prompts a subject that is in constant becoming through abjection — an event that can take place through discursive practices and would therefore point towards an abject that is already in discourse. I conceive this need of shame and abjection to be iterated as a semiotic discourse that works through the repetition of practices and the recurrence of events along with their affective intensity to affect subjectification as much as a linguistic speech act would do. To some degree, this semiotic

discourse would resist stability, as it would always be open to stimuli that can potentially bring in new meanings. So far, this understanding of the abject in the same terms as the non/object of shame — that which is rejected from the self but never abandons it — makes me think that the self will act similarly towards both the non/object of shame and the abject: rejecting them while at the same time, preserving them as constitutive of the self (Kristeva, 2-4; Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 138). Following the logic that I'm exposing, it seems that both Tomkins and Kristeva speak of a kind of subject that, because it's always being acted on through affect, can't be said to be finite or ever consolidated. According to that and informed by Kristeva, I'm suggesting that, considering the possibility of a semiotic discourse allowed by the affective system and thinking about it as a signifying process, the subject that is the product of shame and abjection would then be a subject in process [*le sujet en procès*] inasmuch as affective changes would entail changes in the subject too, and in the ways she understands and allows the unfolding of different potential futures.

This subject in process to some extent would, according to Kristeva, depend on the workings of imagination and fantasy to acquire significance and render herself intelligible (Kristeva 1982, 5). Kristeva would conceive literature as the only possible signifier for the semiotic meanings, as the only way to convey, already in abjection, “the most precious non-objects” of the self (Kristeva 1982, 5). Her writing invokes a certain sense of nostalgia for the non-objects, the semiotic, that get lost in the process of signification. This point can be sensed alike in Tomkins' affect theory. At the threshold of signification, the corporeal affect goes through the effervescent experience of congealing into signs and objects to be sublimated from its impossibility into our semiotic self (Kristeva 1982, 11). The touch, the sound, the heat, and the light that Nathanson (2008) notes for Tomkins are information worthy of storage and retrieving would become a dissolute object in memory, a non-object that is however

impregnated with a semiotic meaning that, like a starry sky or a vista of open seas, takes the subject beyond the signifier, beyond what can be touched, heard or thought (Kristeva 1982, 12). This is a process that Noell MacAfee describes using the word “infection” (MacAfee 2004, 47); something that, through an imagination that goes beyond the present, violates the borders of the self in a way that transgresses the representational. These lines can serve as a summary of the reasons why, when analysing “Curvaceous Dolls”, I will suggest not to understand shame as prompted by means of a signifier — an object — that re-presents this affect. Contrarily, I will follow the aforementioned to argue that shame as a signified — like the object — is always there in the surroundings of awareness (McAfee 2004, 49), waiting to be attached to a signifier and thereby, enter the circuit of subjectification.

The semiotic meaning, its signified, although abjected, because it conveys the remnants of the pre-linguistic and means — quite literally — the excesses that could not be condensed in the sign or the object, it is not anchored to the here and the now of the real. It floats in its sublimated form to a there and then where everything that was missed in signification can be perceived, perhaps hoping for re-presentation. This floating characteristic of the abjected non-object that supposes a potential for intensifying the meaning of future events but that however does not seem to follow the logic of the symbolic is what I find most interesting for my purpose in my thesis. In the following, I will propose a way to theorize a script for subjectification with a non-object through Klein’s concept of phantasy.

## **1.5 | Phantasy and futurity**

The ways in which the external — which in my argument would be the shame that is projected by disgust — becomes incorporated into the subject has been a recurrent topic of discussion for psychoanalysis, particularly in 1943 within the context of the British

Psychoanalytical society's "Controversial Discussions". This forum, which was aimed at discussing the role of "introjection and projection of objects" (Isaacs 1943, 267) was however opened by Susan Isaacs with a paper titled "The Nature and Function of Phantasy". She understood that in order to discuss the phenomenon of projection and introjection of objects, the audience should first understand or agree upon a definition of phantasy. Before, this psychoanalytical concept was understood only as conscious phantasies, but she wanted to extend this definition to also "connote unconscious mental content, which may seldom or never become conscious" (Isaacs 1943, 268). She did so informed by the works of Melanie Klein and in order to support Klein's ideas within the ongoing debates within the psychoanalytical school.

Klein wanted to stop the undervaluation of the "dynamic importance of phantasy" (Isaacs 1943, 269) that resulted from the common usage of this concept in contrast with reality, understanding reality as "identical with external or material or objective facts" (Isaacs 1943, 269). She argued that this practice of using phantasy does not account for the psychical reality and the meaning that mental processes have as such and entails a prejudice in favor of external reality. This disregard towards the psychic events occurring within phantasy that are felt by the subject as real but dismissed by theorists in favor of the real reality was referred to by her as "the attitude of the ego in ordinary civilized life today" (Isaacs 1943, 269). Following Klein's understanding of phantasy, in my analysis this concept is treated as reality and not as a concept subjected to it. Actually, since Klein herself claims that the main indicator of the subject's development is not autoeroticism — as it was for Freud — (Klein 1984, 51-52), but the subject's ability to handle impulses and feelings (Klein 1984, 48-56) and, as she shows, feelings modify the meaning of the object (Klein 1984, 84-88), I understand that affects are virtually able to create objects in psychic reality through feelings.

The concept of phantasy is also interesting in itself as that which is present in all mental processes and brings together into our thoughts the external facts that will then be articulated in a way that they can acquire meaning. As Isaacs noted in her paper: “The word phantasy serves to remind us always of this distinctive character of meaning in the mental life” (Isaacs 1943, 272). The interesting take of Klein’s when it comes to discuss this mental meaning is that, in contrast with Freud, she included perception and feelings as part of the phantasy and not only concepts or ideas (Spillius 2001). This is important because allows for the nuanced understanding of the introjected object that structures my analysis of “Curvaceous Dolls”. My view, which resonates with Isaac’s paper is that, following Klein, phantasy can be conceived as having two layers of meaning: a conceptual one and an affective or sensorial one (Isaacs 1943, 273-274). This is shown in Klein’s theory of the splitting process that explains how different affective meanings (love, hatred and idealization) are independent and then integrated in the same object (Klein 1984, 190-192), a process for which I understand, object and meaning require a certain extent of independent existence. Under this logic, the affective or sensorial layer of meaning is made intelligible by being “decoded into conceptual terms”, which entails an “abstracting [of] certain aspects of experience from the total, by means of certain criteria” (Isaacs 1943, 274). This could be said to be similar to Kristeva’s process of signification but happening within phantasy: the semiotic component of an experience being abstracted — and therefore restricted — according to certain criteria in order to make it intelligible and suitable to be thought of. This division that, informed by Kristeva, I want to use to read Klein is not an artificial one and other authors have already theorized the influence of the “object’s feelings” in Klein’s theory (Stein 1990, 506). These authors mainly argue that the affect connected to an experience that has been incorporated in phantasy exists separated from the object introjected (Stein 1990, 506). However, this logic — based on Klein’s



thoughts on affects as something that can support or obstruct the subject's development depending on how successfully they solve their need for object-relatedness<sup>9</sup> — presupposes objective moral qualities such as “good” or “bad” to feelings and objects, which I find too reductive.<sup>10</sup>

Klein would argue that the force propelling the subject to relate to the external object is to be found in anxiety and libidinal interest (Klein 1988, 220), which I suggest claims for a sort of instinctual or biological truth inside the self that doesn't give full credit to her experiences while it also signals a sort of moralizing trait in Klein's understanding of the object-subject relationship. Kleinian theory argues that there is a desirable path for the self susceptible to be measured in terms of “success” according to the ego's ability to incorporate into her phantasy the appropriate external objects from reality that would put the *phantastic* reality in equation with it (Klein 1988, 221). This true relation to reality being governed by sadism, libido and guilt (Klein 1988, 221). In Klein's work, the symbolic from which the introjected objects come seems to be already there in the self, and the equations between it and its objects, events or affects are depicted as positions the ego takes during its development. However, since this equation presupposes the existence of phantastic objects within the self prior to her contact with reality — because they are needed to be equated with the external object — I consider it too audacious, particularly under the light of Tomkins' affect theory. Based on that, I think it is important to note that our relationship with the outside world and how it will eventually become part of our phantasy can be deeply affected by disgust and shame, being the latter integral for the process of subjectification in Tomkins. Accordingly, I am suspicious about the

9 For more on the subject's inherent object-relatedness and affects as intrinsically object-related see: Klein's “Some theoretical conclusions regarding the emotional life of the infant” (1952) in Klein 1984, 61-93. Specially pp. 63, 72 for an understanding of the first partial object (the “gratifying” [good] and the “frustrating” [bad] breast) and the “complete object” (the mother).

10 For more on how bad feelings create bad objects and good feelings create good objects see: Rivière 1936, 225.

neutrality and the moral component in Klein's theory, which attributes a degree of success to the chosen introjected object under the assumption of a morally appropriate and objective way of identification of the self with the outer object. Something that also presupposes objectivity to the external object based on the subjective perception of the analyst alone. Moreover, I want to acknowledge that for Kristeva, the symbolic supposes a rupture, a compulsory fitting of a life force contained in the semiotic chora that is full of potentiality into a grid that would make the self intelligible. This, which I find sounds already like a violent process, may seem also devoid of any neutrality after having added the ways in which Tomkins argues that affects, and particularly shame, can condition the signification of the subject.

Isaacs continues her paper with a quote from Locke: "We have no ideas at all, but what originally came either from sensible objects without, or what we felt within ourselves" (Isaacs 1943, 275). A citation that I find particularly interesting because, if for an object to be introjected and incorporated as an idea we first need to feel it within or without ourselves, then the signification of this introjected object seems to carry the twofold model of meaning that I'm presenting, that of a semiotic signified that would stand for the experience as it was felt in a somatic way, and that of a symbolic signifier, which would be the cognized meaning that the object represents; either as concept or as object. I find a glimpse of this already available in Klein when she stated: "I would not assume that the breast is to him [the infant] a merely physical object. The whole of his instinctual desires and his unconscious phantasies imbue the breast with qualities going far beyond the actual nourishment it affords" (Klein 1984, 180); and when she claimed that there wouldn't be any symbolic representation of the subject's relationship with external objects without an affective bond with them (Klein 1988, 224, 225). I want to point out to the affinities that conceiving the affective as a precondition for the development of the subject has with Tomkins' theory. My suggestion is that phantasy

and affects would similarly be the human ability to give meaning to what otherwise would be rendered as instinctive reactions to external stimuli that are eventually presented as objects to be introjected or projected. In Kleinian theory however, the affective meaning of these phantasies can only be strengthen or intensified (Klein 1988, 341) by the internalization and recurrent display or re-production of an emotion, which I have been calling semiotic discourse. The means by which stimuli get introjected as objects and become part of the subject's phantasy is what interests me most for this thesis.

As Isaacs says quoting Joan Rivière “phantasy-life is never ‘pure phantasy’” (Isaacs 1943, 282), and based on the previous paragraph discussion, I would suggest that probably, neither it is pure material realities that have been introjected, affects have probably played a role in it. As Isaacs shows when discussing Rivière’s “The Genesis of Psychical Conflict in Earliest Infancy” (1936), “sensations of warmth, the desire contact” are soon interpreted — or misinterpreted — in a subjective manner and registered as a pleasurable experience composed by an object/concept — that could be the breast or the mum’s lap — and a felt experience — the bodily sensation of warmth. These two components that are suitable to be theorized under the signifier-signified framework, produce a signification that is a phantasy-life of pleasure that, as Rivière notes in her paper, can be re-presented by the self to the self under the influence of the pleasure-pain principle. This would mean that pleasure can be performed if the rules of citation are properly followed; if the object/concept of pleasure is cited or the felt experience is enacted again, which would in turn produce new codifications for the phantasy of pleasure; this is a process that I’m naming semiotic discourse. The outline I have advanced in these lines is that the signification of phantasy can be accessed and altered by intervening the process of citation, which I think the female protagonist of Li Ang text does from the second half of the story.

I will come back now to the role of affects in designing phantasy and unfolding futures. As already discussed, I'm suggesting that phantasy, as much as Tomkins primordial shame or Kristeva's abjection, allows the signification of the subject according to her past experiences and hence, creates a blueprint that affects the interpretation she can produce of future events. For Klein, affects structure the mind and the world is experienced always through them (Rusbridger 2012, 149). As Rusbridger states "there is no feeling that is not attached to and expressed by an unconscious phantasy, and, conversely, no phantasy that is not accompanied by affect" (Rusbridger 2012, 146). It is based on this, that I find that the affective system resembles a path through which the subject performs the signifying process:

Pre-verbal emotions and phantasies are revived in the transference situation, they appear as 'memories in feelings', as I would call them, and are reconstructed and put into words within the help of the analyst. [...] In fact, we cannot translate the language of the unconscious into consciousness without lending it words from our conscious realm. (Klein 1984, 180)

According to this, it seems that the words from the conscious can follow the path of the affective system to signify the pre-verbal. Thus I wonder, if this transferential process can be done by language to signify the affective and convey the semiotic within the symbolic, could the transferential path be traversed in the reversed direction and use the semiotic to signify over the symbolic? My concern arises from Klein's mono-directional line of communication between the semiotic and the symbolic, the unconscious and the conscious, that always benefits the latter.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This logic is what I find Klein applies to Dick, her infant patient, when she grants — or rather imposes — onto his otherwise unintelligible utterings an object with which he can re-present his mumbling in an intelligible way (Klein 1988, 219-235). By doing this, she is effectively attaching the semiotic meaning of his mumbling to a symbolic signifier; the child's unintelligible pulses become understandable through the objects and concepts given by the analyst, but the signification is not his own interpretation, but Klein's. In all, the affective meaning of his phantasies might just have been dismissed for intelligibility's sake. Another sample of this imposition of the mono-directional imposition of the symbolic over the semiotic to make it intelligible for the analyst can be found in Edna (1983), "Words and Working Through."

At the time of the “Controversial Discussions” (1942-1944) Klein had not yet theorized the paranoid-schizoid position neither the concept of projective identification. This is why Britton (1995), discussing phantasy in the context of creative writing, argues that the phantasy discussed back then only accounts for the one that is either based or takes place accompanied by an actual experience. Then, the concept could not have been theorized as going against experience, something that however may happen in creative texts (Britton 1995, 90). My conclusion is that, since the objects in phantasy are experienced as real in the mind, the affects they convey must be felt as real too without necessarily be tested against any factual truth. The mental landscape that this allows me to imagine is that of a phantasy populated by objects (signifiers) that got incorporated along with affective meanings (signifieds). These two components of the introjected object in phantasy can be detached from each other in the playful workings of an unconscious phantasy that does not need to be accountable to the external world and its logical rules.<sup>12</sup> If I bring back at this point Tomkins’ affect theory and Kristeva’s abjection as processes that, due to past experiences affect the way we interpret future events, I would suggest that, if phantasy can work separated from the real external world, then the interpretations of the future will necessarily be influenced by this unconscious process too. Furthermore, as the analysis of “Curvaceous Dolls” will show, this unconscious phantasy could become real if the subject starts imagining it and looking for external objects on which to make it intelligible. The subject would be looking in the real for the objects of her unconscious phantasy, and therefore, driving her future according to an impulse that emerged from within. This is what I find the protagonist of Li Ang’s story is doing, a sort of coming back into the semiotic via undoing the signifying processes she has been put through, detaching the components of her phantastic objects and recoding her phantasy by placing the

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12 Britton (1995) argues that this “imagination” or “psychic retreats”, as Steiner names them in his book *Psychic Retreats* (1993), produces a sort of non-material truth allowed by its radical division from the real.

abjected signified into different dolls, then into the figure of the breasts, and in a final turn inwards to the semiotic, onto an all-pervading pale green eyed monster. The theoretical framework sketched in this chapter will allow a reading in which the protagonist is reaching the abjected non-object in her phantasy through the affective system that through shame, provoked the abjection in the first place. By unraveling the signifier-signified relationship provoked by an object-related form of subjectification that was imposed by the symbolic onto her, she will finally imagine a new way to signify herself and the world around and thereby, potentially change her future.

## 2 | Text Analysis: “Curvaceous Dolls”

In the following pages I will analyze “Curvaceous Dolls” focusing on the figure of the female protagonist. Roughly, my analysis suggests that an understanding of Klein’s concept of phantasy through Kristeva’s differentiation between the signifier and the signified allows to read Li Ang’s character as an agential subject able to make use of her affect system and the rules of semiotic discourse to re-codify her phantasy in seemingly unusual ways to eventually, imagine an alternative future. After a short introduction to present the role and importance of affects in the story and the implications of Kristeva’s theory of signification as a process with two sides: the semiotic and the symbolic; I will proceed to illustrate my proposal for the character’s signification, which is mediated through shame, with one of the main figures in the text: the doll. Then, I will gradually advance to the concept of phantasy through another important figure in the story: the breasts, and its potential to materialize the character’s subjective affective life. Finally, I will discuss the character of the pale green eyed monster, a non-object of abjection that allows the protagonist to step away from the phallogocentric system of signification — and her husband — and project her phantasy to open up an alternative future.

### 2.1 | An affected story, an abjected phantasy

The story starts outlining the structure of the plot about to be developed in just one sentence: “She had yearned for a doll — a curvaceous doll — ever since she was a little girl. But [...]” (Li Ang 1997, 179). Here, the narrator expresses that this is the story of a recurrent yearning that keeps finding obstacles for its fulfillment. A potential source of joy is thus imagined and a warning against its eventual discontinuity is preempted. Moreover, the protagonist’s yearning

is presented as already attached to an object; to a doll. Thereby, her longing is portrayed as already fixed, the story of its development is hidden from the reader, who is only given the result of a process. In this reading, the object of her cravings may easily become the token that stands for the entirety of her affective impulse, something that can subtly persuade the reader to understand the subjectivity of her wishing as a consolidated entity, as if it shared the characteristics of the object it becomes attached to. My aim is to look at the production of that yearning in the story from a different stance, one that tries to give credit to the malleability of human desiring impulses, the ways they are shaped and the consequences of this process.

The structure of joy that the quotation illustrates is that of a circulation of wishful interest<sup>13</sup> that, as the starting of the following sentence shows — “But [...]” — could be potentially interrupted. In this sense, it is comparable to what Sedgwick and Frank read in Tomkins; a conceptualization of shame as “both an interruption and a further impediment to communication” (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 137). As the story develops, it becomes clear that shame indeed plays this role in the plot. I find that this “perpetual danger” of discontinuity of pleasure is also compatible with Kristeva’s figure of the abject, which signals the constant threat that delimits the subject (Kristeva 1984, 9). This abjected other that in psychoanalytic terms is part of her desire would be situated in the figure of the doll and taken into her self in a process that resembles what Melanie Klein named introjection; the internalization of the external object that “influences ego development” through phantasy’s activity (Klein 1984, 58).

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13 The concepts used to refer to this impulse towards an object of interest that can satisfy a feeling of longing range from “desire” in psychoanalytic terms, and used to refer to a rather instinctual force led by drives that exist in the subject before her entering into the symbolic, and “wish”; the concept Tomkins uses to refer to the pulse that animates the subject in the affective system. Contrarily to “desire”, I believe that “wish” is harder to separate from the signifying process of its affect. The tangible performance of an affective wish seems to be always already conditioned by experience whereas “desire” conveys a theoretical connection with the more primitive, pre-objectal, semiotic realm.



To continue with the starting citation, it is also clear that the story is a narration by a voice that recalls the past, knowing already the unfolding of future events. My view is that the story shows the character's desire mostly when it has already gone through its whole process of signification, when it has been re-presented and is narrated to us. As if the inner landscape of the character was already stabilized, the reader is pushed by the narration to adhere to the conceited idea that the affective can be fully conveyed by the symbolic, that the objects and concepts used by the narrator can contain the character's subjectivity. However, through a close reading of the semiotic impulses and the character's memories, I aim to provide an interpretation that tries to resist the reduction of the semiotic into a sign or an object from the symbolic. I am moved to do so by a reticence to think of the sign or the object as capable to comprise and fully signify the much richer semiotic characteristics of the character's desire. This process of acquiring meaning of the protagonist's affective life that I want to sketch starts with the story itself, with the doll being named. In a rather visual way (peeping at, *kuīshì* 窺視), the character finds out her neighbor's doll and how carelessly it's treated by her. "If she had a doll of her own [...] she would treat it lovingly, never letting it out of her sight" [the Chinese version says 經常抱著它 'constantly hugging it']). The doll comes into being only by contrast, at this point of the story, it is just the prevision of an object that would receive the protagonist's love. Accordingly, its importance is not in the form of its signifier (the mental image created by the word doll *wáwa* 娃娃 or its material reality), but in its signified, in the meaning that congeals in it and in the desire that is thus re-presented. What interests me is not the doll as word, concept or object, but the force that is born in that opposition. This, that I'm calling *force*, would be the impulse that for Klein stems from phantasy and allows the self to project and introject (Klein 1988, 220). Following her, I use phantasy acknowledging the fact that it has an affective character which, to the extent that the

affective system is a bodily ability to receive external stimuli, circulate them and give them meaning — this is, turn them into cognized feelings — it does touch upon Kristeva’s semiotic realm. Following Klein, phantasy is that which emerges from symbolism — which is not Kristeva’s symbolic but the capacity of objects and signs to stand for a meaning — and works to incorporate external objects as the subject of one’s affective imagination, thereby creating the meaning and the affective charge of subsequent events. As I will be showing in the following lines, phantasy can be affected by lived experiences and cannot be only understood as a discharge of some sort of pure semiotic self onto a predetermined object that symbolizes it. In my analysis, I intent to show that what the reader may find the female character is introjecting in herself would be highly affected by the fact that this is a process happening already within the symbolic. As already pointed out in the theoretical chapter, Kristeva’s semiotic-symbolic division is useful in this regard to distinguish between the different layers of meaning comprised in the introjected object that will eventually allow significance. She understands this division as a boundary between a “drive-related and affective meaning organized according to primary processes” (Kristeva 1995, 104) — the semiotic, that resonates with Klein’s concept of phantasy except for the drive component — and “the discursive practice that adheres to the logical and grammatical rules of speaking” (Kristeva 1995, 103) — the symbolic. “Curvaceous Dolls” gives hints for both types of meanings to be found. The protagonist’s desire for embracing something lovingly that moves her to create her own doll out of a bundle of old clothes and the memories around this doll are mainly described in a somatic, tactile way — which I interpret as highlighting the semiotic component of the character’s recalling of this childhood memory. She would remember it from the “warmth and comfort of her husband’s embrace”, always “sobbing” (in Chinese, the author uses xìxì 細細 to describe her crying: a pair of characters that convey the sound of the

sobbing and a tactile quality, since they mean ‘thin’ and are formed out of the radical for silk, sī 絲). Specially telling of the semiotic/symbolic dichotomy that is at stage at the origin of the story is the description of the moment when she confesses to her husband her memories of the doll, right before he laughed at her. This happens one night when, after having had sex, she stares at the open window, through which the moon light penetrates in the room, casting a “meticulously fine” (極其細緻, note how in the Chinese version the characters for ‘fine’ [xìzhì 細緻] both have silk as their radical component, evoking texture) net of light. Then, “she had a *sudden impulse to reveal* everything” (Li Ang 1997, 180) (in Chinese, instead of *reveal* the author uses biǎobái 表白 [express, explain], which is conformed by the character biǎo 表, whose first meaning is ‘surface’ and bái 白, which means ‘white’). The scene is very visual, the moon and its light coming through the window and the character staring at it, while attentive to her husband, “still somewhat breathless” after sex (Li Ang 1997, 180). The need to express herself in words comes in a *sudden impulse*, showing the reader that something that was not being said is abruptly brought into awareness. Contrarily, in the Chinese version she “suddenly considers that she must give an explanation” (她突然覺得自己必須表白), conveying in the self-reflexive form (自己) a different sense of obligation and self-judgement that is not reflected in the *sudden impulse* of the English translation. She evokes an awareness of a sort of responsibility towards her husband, a duty to express herself that describes her as somehow conscious of the workings of the symbolic and not just an impetuous being. I suggest that how the experience of the character is told through her memories in a rather semiotic way depicts her phantasy as acquiring meaning in a felt way, sort of avoiding language. According to this, up until now, I think that the story provides the keys to understand the character’s semiotic pulse as a potential signified that flows, yet unnamed, and only sensed. The evocation of this landscape of textures and references to the body is about to

be broken just a few lines after the beginning of the text. An explicit rupture that occurs in the form of direct speech, when the husband names the doll. It is interesting to note how in the Chinese version, the word choice is the passive form ‘was named as’ (被叫做), whereas in the English translation this connotation of the doll being brought to language is less apparent and the responsibility of the husband in the process is highlighted: “Maybe that wasn’t the first time anyone *had called it* a ‘rag doll’” (Li Ang 1997, 180). I understand that in this sentence, the inauguration of a process of becoming for the female character is contained. Her desire is portrayed as being made intelligible in the symbolic, named/othered by means of disgust-shame and therefore, preserved in abjection. The doll is presented as the object of her husband’s disgust, the object for him to project shame, an affect that she introjects along with the object. My view is that he expels into the outer world an affect that comes from his own phantasy, whereas she is pushed by his disgust and the self reflexive workings of shame to internalize his behavior. In this scene, the husband would be using the affective system to affect the external world and therefore, also his wife’s internal one, which would make his disgust part of her self. This is also the moment when the reader, in an arguably patronizing way, might find the protagonist’s desire alike to an incipient lesbianism. Her childhood memories and the affection in her yearnings for a doll can indeed be understood as a repressed lesbian desire, but equating a pre-oedipal desire or an infantile wish for caress symbolized in a doll with an adult sexuality is too venturesome and not a strong enough argument to avoid considering other interpretations.

## 2.2 | Signifying affects: the doll

妳的布娃娃啊！他笑著輕喊 (Li 李, “有曲线的娃娃”)

He laughed. ‘Your very own rag doll!’ (Li Ang 1997, 180)

The argument that I'm presenting when I say that I want to focus in the force that emerges in the encounter of her semiotic pulse with the object-doll is the idea that the character's desire is a signified without a consolidated signifier. A desire that, as if pre-oedipal, doesn't seem to have one consolidated source of libidinal pleasure. However, by means of recurrent affective experiences, it becomes momentarily attached to the figure of the doll performing a semiotic discourse. This concept will be applied to the analysis shortly, when the second doll — the clay doll — appears. I interpret that the husband, by uttering the aforementioned words is sublimating the character's desire and attempting to name what is pre-nominal and pre-objectal; by doing it, he would also be abjecting that same desire (Kristeva 1984, 11). However, as I already pointed out, Kristeva argues that the heterogeneous nature of semiotic language makes it impossible to permanently fix its meaning, which opens the possibility for a subject that cannot be given a consolidated signification, that can't consistently hold on to an identity, a subject she calls the subject in process [*le sujet en procès*] (Kristeva 1984, 15). As McAfee notes, this subject in process allows to account for the subject's agency taking also into consideration the unconscious and the pressures of other social structures (McAfee 2004, 1-9). It is this concept that allows to be skeptical about the protagonist's behaviors as reflecting a consolidated form of desire. Conceiving the protagonist as a subject in process would let the reader see the husband, and the recurrent placement of the protagonist's semiotic pulse in particular objects that he promotes, as the responsible of creating the fiction of a consolidated identity in her. The object of my enquiry is looking at how by repeatedly linking the semiotic with a symbol via the affective, the protagonist's husband — and perhaps some readers too— acts as that which materializes the protagonist's yearnings into an intelligible and stable identity. My hypothesis is that in Li Ang's story, the role of the husband, as the one that uses direct speech, is that of imposing the symbolic that tries to *name* and signify the

protagonist's semiotic pulses (Kristeva 1984, 11). In the following pages, I will show how this molding of desire can be read as enabled by the working of affects that try to regulate the production of the female character's phantasy.

As I previously mentioned, the original version tries to recall the protagonist's memory in a more sensitive, semiotic way, and what she wants to *reveal* is not so much depicted as a truth that has been hidden and requires unveiling. I suggest that it is instead an *explanation*, a clarification of something that is portrayed as in the surface for her; somewhere she is self-aware of. Before the revelation, her desire was only recalled in a bodily manner, through the senses, but after uttering it, it is shown as embodied in the figure of the doll. In the text, she finally tells him, haltingly and blushing with embarrassment, how she made her first doll, how she embraced it and how she was ridiculed by her friends for doing so. At this point, the starting quotation of the husband's intervention is particularly illustrative of the way in which I find that affect is incorporated in the female character's process of subjectification: Although in English he *laughs*, in Chinese he *screams a laugh*; the main action being a 'light' (qīng 輕) 'shouting' or 'yelling' (hǎn 喊) — a verb that reinforces the feeling of rupture and projection of disgust. The husband, by yelling "your very own rag doll", reminds of the rupture Kristeva posits as the origin of the subject. The semiotic that the female character was portrayed as trying to explain is described as abruptly brought to the symbolic and made the object of disgust by/for him. It is in this process that I think the semiotic is abjected. By showing his disgust towards her attitude with the doll the husband is characterized as not only rejecting her behavior, but also as pushing shame onto her. Interestingly enough, in Tomkins theory, contempt-disgust has been seen as a signal to prompt rejection upon others and the self (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 135). The shamed, the abjected, and the loved are the same and their workings would define the phantasy of the female character and therefore, her unfolding.

Based on this, I propose that for him, this experience would be ruled by contempt-disgust, because he seems to be wanting to definitely break the bond with the disgusting object, which stands for her interest. Whereas for her, since the story shows her unwillingness to permanently renounce her yearnings, this event would be a shameful one, and the shamed or abjected event will be internalized. In other words, and using Klein's terms, shame will be introjected as the result of her husband's disgust projection. In Tomkins theory, contempt-disgust has been understood as "the mark of the oppressor" (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 139). An oppressor that the female character, following my interpretation, sometimes find in her husband, for he is the one trying to be in control of her by shaming her, abjecting her, and therefore, positing himself as somehow superior and worthy of interest. In this line, the performance of disgust would be serving a purpose for him, by shaming and abjecting her desires, his self would be left in a higher position, even though only in comparative terms.

Following my previous line of thought, I understand that the husband is portrayed as feeling threatened or not understanding the affective bond between the protagonist and the doll. I read this bond as a signified that cannot be fully grasped by language but only temporarily represented in the figure of the doll. As the following quotation expresses, for her, the object of her husband's disgust is the affective bond, the semiotic signified she had tried to explain, and not so much the doll, that would be the temporary site of disgust. Based on this, her pain would stem from his laughing: "She failed to see the humor in it, and telling him had not been easy. He could be awfully inconsiderate sometimes" (Li Ang 1997, 180). The protagonist's main concern would be the shaming of the non-object; the abjection of her affective bond. Again, the signified is shamed in a sort of metonymy: by displaying disgust towards the signifier, which is the doll. Based on all the aforementioned, I'm implying that there are two layers of pain that can be read in the protagonist: the unavoidable fact that language cannot

fully convey her semiotic meaning, and her husband's performance of disgust towards something valuable for her — or already part of her because, according to Kristeva, it's not possible to talk about a self without its abject.

In my reading, when the abjected affective force is brought to the symbolic in the figure of the doll and put in circulation through disgust, the story is set in motion. In this process, the signified that is the affective bond is shamed, transmitting this affect to the object-doll. To protect the affective bond from further shaming, I see the protagonist hiding it from her husband by removing it from language and making it unintelligible. Accordingly, in the following pages of the story, she can be read as gradually renouncing the nameable object-doll to protect from her husband's shaming what she really cares about: the affective force that prompted her to the doll in the first place. However, as I mentioned before, the story also proves that disgust-shame can be enacted in a rather semiotic discursive way; it can be enhanced through the iteration of affectively charged events or already formed phantasies. By semiotic discourse I mean a series of events that are remembered in a somatic manner and strengthen the self-disciplining effect of the regulatory behaviors learnt beforehand, hence the importance of looking at existing power imbalances when discussing subjectification. I see this semiotic discourse being enacted in the second scene where a doll — a clay doll — appears, particularly in the way the character's thoughts of it are presented. These are written in a way that I believe, explicitly belongs to her husband's discourse: "She began to think of her second doll, the one made of clay. Since her first doll was called the rag doll, this one ought to be known as the clay doll" (Li Ang 1997, 183). Although it's clear in the quote that the clay doll is named by herself, it is however presented already in relation to the first (rag) doll. This is where I find the explicit sign of the husband's discourse, in the realization of how the character's phantasy has been modified by the previous doll-related experience,



specifically by the abjecting shame projected by her husband on it. Following the appearance of the clay doll, the narrator tells the reader that making a clay doll only occurred to her after wanting to hug her neighbor's doll and being stopped by its owner. Therefore, I suggest that actually, it is wanting to hug which comes before thinking of a doll. Besides, when the character recollects these memories of the clay dolls, the Chinese version talks about clay figurines (nírén 泥人). The translation I propose would therefore be: "She regularly went there with the other children to make *clay figurines* [instead of clay dolls]. [...] She fondled them [the clay figurines], wishing out that some day she could rub real skin as soft and glowing as that" (Li Ang 1997, 184). In the Chinese text, it is only when she is using the previous experience as template to name the current event that she actually takes her husband's exact words and says clay *doll*, as in: "Since her first doll was called the rag *doll*, this one ought to be known as the clay *doll* [níwáwa 泥娃娃, wáwa 娃娃 meaning 'doll']". The fact that in the English version this figurine/doll difference is homogenized and the word doll is used to translate both Chinese terms is another proof of a conscious or unconscious tendency to make the heterogeneous traces of the character's yearnings uniform and suitable to fit an identity category.

After her unsuccessful attempt to take the doll from her neighbor's arms, the doll owner's mother comes to calm her crying. Then, the solace that the text expresses she felt in her embrace — a feeling that will recurrently appear in the story — reminds her of her mother. The way of narrating this memory forces upon the doll a broader torrent of affects that, contrarily to some of the interpretations available in English, I find that are not only sexually inspired, but also related to a sort of nostalgia for the time when it took place, for the character's childhood and her absent mother — a detail that is revealed in the very beginning of the story. The narration also brings to light the regulations that her phantasy abides to,

having an external voice narrating the ways in which the events are meaningful for her in a retrospective manner. This way, instead of taking her emotions as central for the story, the reader is guided to see the doll as the source and signified of her affective life. I have been arguing that this may diminish the reader's space for understanding the role of the character's desire while also difficulties seeing the regulations imposed by her husband's affective work in her semiotic impulses. This intervention in her development results in a phantasy that acquires meaning through iterating the semiotic discourse that the narrator enacts by presenting the character's desire from the figure of the doll, trying to link it with the previous scene in which memories related to a rag doll had been invested with shame. However, a close reading and a comparison with the Chinese version show that she can be read as only taking the doll as the locus of the affective narration because she has previously been taught to do so, when her husband named the rag doll for the first time. The appearance of the third (wooden) doll can also be seen as following this pattern of iteration of a semiotic discourse conditioned by her affected phantasy. However, before this wooden doll is mentioned, the text shows another object of desire for the character: the child.

The child, which appears at a latter stage in the story when, according to the interpretation I'm exposing, she has already acknowledged the abjected within her and is constantly troubled by it in her dreams, comes along with a wish to "escape", a yearning for a "liberating force" (Li Ang 1997, 194):

Her image of the child was indistinct. She had always avoided thinking about children, for they reminded her of her own childhood and caused her to experience overwhelming waves of pain. But in order to prove her potential for motherhood and show that she no longer required a pair of mother's breasts for herself, she needed a child, one whose only qualification was that it be a child, with no special talents nor any particular appearance; so long as it had a mouth

with which to suck her breasts and two tiny hands with which to fondle them, that was enough for her. (Li Ang 1997, 190, 191)

In this quotation I find that the text shows in a particularly clear way the contrast between her affective semiotic life and the symbolic. The protagonist's troubles with the constraints of the symbolic become visible both in the feeling of impossibility of her husband's body to satisfy her or in the encounter with the abjected in her dreams that precede the idea of the child. The feeling of lack and the yearning for something "liberatory" that the two mentioned sensations seem to cause in her, would make her look for a new way through which to satisfy herself; a new object that hopefully would comfort her. This is exactly what I suggest she is looking for, and object through which to signify her affective impulse for feeling solace, the child would just be the means through which she would be touched and provided with the feeling she has been craving ever since she wanted to hug the first doll. As she says: "She could — in fact, she should — have a child" (Li Ang 1997, 191). My interpretation is that the child would be the object that her phantasy, which is conditioned by the fact that she is a woman living in a society with a strong familial values and high esteem for motherhood, finds more feasible to bring her joy and security. Actually, when she phantasizes about the child she says so in a rather straightforward way: "[she] enjoyed standing naked on the icy bathroom floor and playing with her swelling, full breasts, pretending that it was her child's hands fondling the objects that represented *absolute security* — it's mother's breasts" (Li Ang 1997, 191). I think here she can be read as unconsciously aware of the twofold significance of the figure of the child. On the one hand its role as signifier — the figure of the child as her own son— and on the other, its signified affective value — that of being the means for her to attain *absolute security*. The figure of the breasts in this scene also deserves attention. I think this figure can be analyzed in the same twofold way I proposed for the child; as the breast-object

— a signifier from the external world — and as the site where her affective yearning for a place to *rest* congeals — an affective signified that gives a non-logical meaning to the breast as an object: “The pleasure brought her fantasies that the tiny hands of the child were actually her own, and that the mother, mysterious yet great, was actually an endless plain whose protruding breasts were mountains upon which she could lay her head and *rest* for as long as she wanted” (Li Ang 1997, 191). This way of analyzing the objects in the story will be further developed in the next section. At this point, what interests me most is the motivation for the emergence of this objects in the first place. A semiotic discourse that, triggered by the shame inflicted on her by her husband, makes her constantly enact her phantasy to look for objects with which to equate her semiotic pulses and signify them. The dolls would be the first sign-object provided by her husband to signify — and quickly shame and abject — her affective semiotic impulses, the next one would be the breast, that appear for the first time in the scene of the clay doll I was just discussing.

The neighbor’s mother’s hug speaks about the protagonist’s desire from a different object: the breasts. They can be read as becoming her new yearning to the extent that she starts forgetting about the doll and focuses only in their softness and comfort in spite of “not knowing what those things were called” (Li Ang 1997, 183) — her desire is thereby portrayed as unexpectedly satisfied by a yet unnamed object. She is depicted as feeling safe and secure there and the feeling of wanting to tell her husband about the clay doll returns. I find interesting how the doll can be read as becoming again the signifier that by default encompasses all the affects that are moving between her and the outside. Although it is hard to determine to what extent she wants to confess a desire for a doll or share with her husband the feeling she is obtaining by thinking of the breasts, which is that of feeling safe and comfortable; the doll is in any case rendered as somehow not a good enough signifier for her,

who goes on looking for new objects to posit her desire on. Before talking to her husband, she recollects the memory of his laughter at the rag doll and forgets about sharing her feelings with him. This decision of hers would be another proof of the iteration of the semiotic discourse I'm proposing, of how a previous discursive experience gets charged with an affective meaning that is iterable by uttering the words attached to it and regulates the subject's subsequent reactions to similar stimuli. This semiotic discourse that I claim is being enacted in this scene doesn't need her husband's explicit display of disgust to make her decide to remain silent, she just equates the previous time she wanted to share her childhood memories with the naming of the rag doll and the shame she was made to feel with the current event. This second time when she names this experience in the same way, in relation with the doll, I suggest she is thereby reinforcing the effect of her husband's disgust on her.

The first scene with the clay doll follows with a narration of her childhood, of a period of time when it usually rained and she used to go to a "mound of clay near where she lived" (Li Ang 1997, 184) to make "clay dolls" (Li Ang 1997, 184) [*'clay figurines'* in the Chinese version, *nírén* 泥人]. Although the text does say that her creations were always different from those of the other children, with lumps onto their chests. However, once more the most of the paragraph is devoted to describe the texture, brightness and color of the clay figurines' lustrous skins, wishing that someday, she would be able to caress a skin as soft and glowing as theirs. After this, it is her husband's bronze skin what calls her attention as he lies by her side. She reaches out to caress him, only to find that he has no breasts — he lacks the object that previously had made her feel safe and that she believes may be able to do so again. At this point of the story is when I find she exercises her agency and starts to look for what she wants, which I believe entails a sense of security and comfort, something she equates to the figure of the breasts and her childhood by wishing to be "the hungry mouth of a child", and

also to her husband's chest, which she used to approach with "reverence" (Li Ang 1997, 185). I aim to read her as trying to find or create in the world the suitable object for her desire, a quest conditioned by abjection and the way her phantasy has been molded by it.

### 2.3 | Making the signified matter: the breasts

Moved by a strange impulse, she unbuttoned her pajama top and exposed her breasts, full like a married woman's, and let them rest on her husband's chest, praying with unprecedented *devotion* that they could be transplanted onto his body. (Li Ang 1997, 184)

The breasts, which I see as acting as the temporary signifier of her semiotic pulse, are thought to be transplantable as if they were just pieces of her imaginary world. I read her praying as the intentional desire to move towards the imagination of a future where her husband has breasts. A future in which he would be invested with the signified that she attributes to the breasts, and that in the previous scenes of the story, had provided her with solace. This is the reason she is said to pray with *sincerity* (qiánchéng 虔誠) in the Chinese version and not with *devotion*; I suggest that she can be read as wanting a future without the deceit and hypocrisy that the workings of the symbolic have projected into her. However, her phantasy conditions the way she can exercise this imagination for the fantasized alternative future she will create. I find her forced to follow the path she has learnt for circulating her affective pulses, finding temporary objects in which she can provisionally make sense of her semiotic self to eventually find a way to undo this restrained way of self development.

While resting her breasts on her husband's chest, he awakes and sees her up on him. After embracing her tightly, they have sex. She doesn't want to explain herself so she just accepts whatever he does, but every time her breasts touch his chest, she feels strangely uneasy, as if

her husband was a heavy burden that was making her sink. At this moment, she remembers her village's old cows, her husband's body becomes a torture and she feels as if thrown into a meat market. In spite of the mild terror she experiences, she remembers how she used to love him, how she used to worship his shoulders, strong but still retaining "the modesty and *stiffness* so characteristic of virgin men. A young fellow's shoulders, not those of a mature man; yet despite the *stiffness*, his muscular curves intoxicated her" (Li Ang 1997, 185). My reading is that she used to love the masculine characteristics of her husband's body. This is more visible in the Chinese version, where it says "It could be said those were the shoulders of a young fellow and definitely not those of a man. However, in spite of their immaturity, they did have the steadiness and muscular tissue of a *complete man*, and that intoxicated her."<sup>14</sup> The slight difference marked by the explicit mention of a *complete man* (nánrén [...] de wánquán, 男人 [...] 的完全) in the Chinese version leads me to understand that she is intoxicated by someone who in spite of being young and unexperienced, has the potential structure to become a man. In the English version however, the word *immaturity* or *unripe* (shēngsè 生澀) is translated like the word for *stiffness* (shēngyìng 生硬) that appears some lines before. I believe that this choice of words erases some of the references and forecloses a reading in which she likes a man that encompasses characteristics of both a young and a mature or complete man and favors instead an interpretation in which she seems to prefer a muscled virgin man, despite his stiffness, over a complete man. Regardless of the Western editors that have found a lesbian desire in Li Ang's female character, the protagonist's liking for men doesn't seem to be questioned during the story, it is actually reinforced: "After they were married, [...] she noticed how the *roughness* and sharp edges had disappeared; his shoulders had become a soft place where her cares and doubts melted away" (Li Ang 1997,

14 “它是有力的，卻還是稍帶處男子才有的那種羞澀和生硬。那多少可以說是少男的肩膀，並不是屬於男人的，可是在生澀中，又有著男人安穩和肌肉的組織上的完全，她為它沈醉了。”

185). In this sentence I interpret that her concerns fade away as her husband becomes less stiff, less like a virgin man and more like a mature one. Furthermore, in Chinese the author doesn't talk about *roughness* but instead, she uses again the word *immature* or *unripe* (shēngsè 生澀) to refer to the sharp edges that are gradually softening with maturity. My suggested reading is that, in a quite straightforward way, the character finds “a feeling of nearly total security” as her husband grows up. A preference for a man's body that grows old and less rough that, as I propose, allows for broader interpretations than just the one of the hidden lesbian desire.

Although along the story there are several scenes in which her desire for her husband — albeit contingent — is made visible, the character eventually starts doubting it. Following my theoretical analysis, as the following quotations show, the affective signified that will be abjected, although used to have her husband's body as signifier, is always haunted by the fear of discontinuity. This way, even though “she then sank into a new kind of indulgence, a feeling of nearly total security that became purely physical” (Li Ang 1997, 185) nevertheless, she remained aware of the instability of her desire, knowing that this “purely physical” security that she finds in her husband's body would not last long:

Mild terror helped her renew the love for her husband's body, and though she was partially successful in this regard, she was sure that this renewal would not last long, and that someday a new weariness would set in to make him repulsive again. The only foolproof way to avoid that was for him to grow breasts, restoring the novelty and security she needed so desperately. (Li Ang 1997, 185)

In the story, this is the reason why I think she spends her days “in constant prayer and anticipation of the time when breasts would grow on her husband's chest, there to await the hungry mouth of a child” (Li Ang 1997, 185). The character can be seen as implying that the



only way she would be able to constantly renovate her feeling of security with her husband would be him growing a pair of breasts. As I noted before, I suggest she thinks of the breasts as the definite object of desire, the ultimate signifier that would satisfy her. To trace their meaning, I'm going back to the first time they appear in the story, when she starts having strange dreams after the scene of the rag doll. This happens after she has refused to have sex with her husband for several times and is taken by him to see a doctor, something she reluctantly accepts: "By now she was fed up with his bossiness and the protector's role in which he prided himself, but her dreams had such a *strong grip* on her that she finally gave in" (Li Ang 1997, 181). Curiously, the *strong grip* the dream has on her is depicted in Chinese as *profoundly* (shēn shēn 深深) *harassing/invading* her (qīnrǎo 侵擾), as if to some extent, it wasn't part of herself but an external event taking over her. The atmosphere in this scene is also important for my argument on the emergence of the breasts. "On the way, the oppressive closeness inside the bus made her regret going" (Li Ang 1997, 181). There is a clear sense of discomfort that in Chinese is explicitly reinforced with one more sentence adding that "the oppressive atmosphere in the bus made her feel bad (nánguò 難過) for having agreed to her husband." It is under these circumstances that she realizes it's useless to talk to her husband and suddenly, someone brushes against her and the interest for breasts is started. She feels interested in the stranger's breasts, "whose drooping outline she could make out under the woman's blouse" (Li Ang 1997, 181).

Her interest aroused, she began painting a series of mental pictures, imagining the breasts as having nipples like overripe strawberries oozing liquid, just waiting for the greedy mouth of a child. Suddenly she felt a powerful urge to lean up against those full breasts, which were sure to be warm and comforting, and could offer her the sanctuary she needed. She closed her eyes and recalled the time she had seen a child playing with its mother's breasts. If only she could be those hands, enjoying the innocent pleasure of fondling a mother's soft, smooth breasts. [...]

She opened her eyes and found herself looking into the anxious face of her husband. ‘You are so pale,’ he said. (Li Ang 1997, 181, 182)

The scene deploys a climate that posits the breasts as something that deflects the oppression I mentioned shrouds her on the way to the doctor. Following Kristeva’s notion of signification, I have been reading the key objects of the story by analyzing these two aspects in them. Such an analysis applied to Klein’s theory of symbol formation that states that symbolism enables to transfer — and deflect — affects and phantasies to others and to objects (Mitchell 1991, 52) allows me to stay away from understanding the breast as standing for a woman as a whole and therefore from considering the protagonist lesbian. Accordingly, I won’t take the breast as a metaphor for a woman in my analysis, but rather as an object — a signifier — associated with an affective event — a signified — through metonymy. The relational character of this figure of speech serves in my argument to relate the breast as an object with an affect and thereby, also to understand the breasts as standing for the desire to move away from the oppressive atmosphere depicted in the story. From this perspective I suggest that the way she feels about the breasts cannot be said to be only sexual in terms of an adult sexual identity. Contrarily, I find that she also wants to be the child’s hands and mouth to enjoy the warmth and comfort she feels is lacking. In all, my argument would be that the character is making her affective wishes matter by reconfiguring her phantasy, something that I will argue, turns to be a way to develop imagined futurities.

## **2.4 | Phantastic futures**

As already stated in the previous chapter, Klein argues that things, activities and interests become the subject of libidinal phantasies by way of symbolic equation (Klein 1988, 220), which logically points to a need for symbolism if a thing, an activity or an interest is to be

incorporated in a phantasy. Following Kristeva's understanding of identification as part of the signifying process of the subject and her theorization of the semiotic as prior to the entering into the symbolic, I suggest that the protagonist in Li Ang's work finds in the semiotic meanings of her phantasy the potential to decode it. As I have been arguing, using the signified-signifier couple of concepts facilitates to unveil the theoretical assumptions that are supporting the reading of this character's desire as a repressed lesbianism.

In the story, I propose that the signifier (the doll or the breast) can't be said to relate only to a sexual signified, its signified can be read as recurrently comprising too a yearning for comfort and security and therefore, I am skeptical about assuming that there is a straightforward link between the object (the doll, the breasts) and the libidinal phantasy that can be equated to a sexual identity. As I already stated before, in several scenes she is not craving for a sexual encounter with the breasts as a symbol for a whole woman, she desires the breast as a means to attain a specific sensation. Her phantasy — as that which provides with a template for her to give meaning to the world — through its constant changes, promotes a reading in which she starts taking control over it by imagining a transplant of the signified in her phantasy to a feasible signifier on her husband's body. She prays so the affective meaning she equates with the figure of the breast can be found on her husband's chest. The interpretation I propose is that the symbolic equation Klein theorizes has happened in the story thanks to the character husband's display of disgust and the workings of shame. The fact that her phantasy has been influenced this way by these two affects should not come as a surprise either, as already explained in the previous chapter, for Klein, the symbolic world of the object needs a network of affective relations to emerge.

According to my interpretation so far, in this story the development of the protagonist's phantasy would follow a course with two main points to highlight. First, her husband *naming* of her feelings, which links her wishing to a sign and gives meaning to both the feelings and the doll. Second, the shaming of her affective attachment to the doll, which breaks the linkage between signifier and signified in a way that resembles Parker and Sedgwick's deconstructive sense of the performative speech act: an understanding of performativity as "dislinked", "nonreferential", or even in an "aberrant relation to its own reference" (Parker and Sedgwick's 1995, 2, 3). In the story, I suggest that this dislinkage prompts the female protagonist to look for new objects of interest. It is at this point that her phantasy starts being pictured as void of any logic, in the Austinian language these authors use, the female character's performance would be *infelicitous* to the eyes of a reader accustomed to a certain horizon of intelligibility. The protagonist, portrayed as unable to find an appropriate external object with which to finalize the process of symbolic equation that Klein would render as normal in the development of the subject is somehow presented as an unintelligible subject — perhaps to the extent that I can say she evokes an *etiolated* existence (Parker and Sedgwick's 1995, 3-5). The problem that the story visibilizes has to do with the way in which her husband, and to some extent the reader too, only conceive a reduced range of symbolic options available for a woman's wish to congeal into something understandable as sexual desire and materialize in an identity. The husband, inasmuch as he is narrated as expecting the protagonist to abide by a set of rules in the expression of her desire, somehow shares a horizon of intelligibility with those readers that also want to find a repressed lesbianism in her. Either by limiting the symbolic world available for the female character or by foreclosing the possible interpretations of her, both the husband and the reader can be considered as falling in a rather Kleinian way of thinking in which the protagonist's phantasy would be

evaluated in terms of success according to a norm. However, it is important to note that the symbolic figures available for her to ossify her desires have been granted by a regulatory symbolic system that does not expect her wishes to go in ways that don't follow the planned normativity — or non-normativity — and therefore, the symbolic can't be fully trusted as the only legitimate representative of her desire. In fact, the whole scene of her first encounter with the breasts happens while she is being taken to see a doctor by her husband, in an atmosphere depicted in the story as oppressive and with her feeling unable to speak out to him or to any doctor. This doesn't happen this way for no reason, I interpret it as a signal of the inadequacy of the symbolic — in this case language — for the purpose of sharing her affective life. To stress the semiotic character of her experience, the description of the scene invokes a tactile imagination. Breasts are soft and smooth to be fondled or oozing liquid to be sucked. The fact that this all happens with her eyes closed, as if in a sort of daydreaming, highlights the suggested division between her inner world and the external, which is brought up on her in direct speech through his husband's utterances: “You are so *pale*” (Li Ang 1997, 182) (cāngbái 苍白 meaning ‘pale’, ‘pallid’, ‘wan’ but also ‘lifeless’, a concept that evokes the *etiolated* existence that I mentioned some lines above). Having said that, I believe that the emergence of the breast responds to a wish for protection from her husband and a dissatisfaction for the insufficient symbolic world he imposes on her. Very much in line with some of the current treatment of phantasies in analysis, here the wishing for breasts would conform a phantasy that is a piece in a causal chain linking together a symptom — the actual desire for a breast — with the past experience that engendered it — the abjection and primordial shame (Abend 1990, 61-65). There is however in this interpretation a clear mismatch between the object of desire as a signifier and the signified that some readers may want to understand in terms of sexual identity: “If only her husband could grow breasts like

that on his chest, with drooping nipples for her to suck on! In a flash she *realized* what was missing from his chest — of course, a pair of breasts to lean on and provide her with *sanctuary*” (Li Ang 1997, 182). As shown in the quotation, for the protagonist, besides the sexual interest she might have in her husband having breasts, these can also be read as the object of her wishing for *sanctuary*. Moreover, the Chinese version does not only offer this happening as her *realization* but also, and perhaps preferably, as an *understanding* (míngbái 明白 as a verb, meaning first ‘to understand’ and secondly ‘to realize’), which I suggest, would have highlighted the abstract significance of the event the protagonist is trying to interpret rather than presenting it as a becoming aware of a fact. The key for the alternative reading I propose is to depart from this leaning towards factual objectivity in the protagonist’s desire and avoid equating the breasts with a whole woman to thereby, avoid concluding that the author is implying a lesbian desire. The reader is not the only one to be blamed for reaching such conclusion, as I have been indicating, this reading is supported by the rules of the symbolic itself; the reader, as the husband, is positioned within a phallogocentric symbolic system that facilitates the channeling of the protagonist’s desire in ways that favor its intelligibility at the cost of its semiotic complexity.

If the reader assumes that, since the character’s wishes have been depicted as seeking for breasts she is therefore desiring a woman, the very reality of this desire would ask for the kind of consistency in both temporal and objectal terms that was presented in the previous chapter. This consistency is actually supported in a circular way by the reductiveness of the symbolic that can only account for the fact that she has felt comfortable by the figure of the breast and this has become part of a phantasy that moves her to find this object again and hence, she is a lesbian. As I have already mentioned when talking about the scene when the clay doll appears for the first time, the recurrence of the figure of the doll and the figure of the breast is

prompted by a semiotic discourse. Every time she feels uneasy for the contrast between the pleasure she experiences in her thoughts or dreams and the sight of her husband when she opens her eyes, she resorts to one of the signs available to signify it. However, I argue that this sign should not be taken as a faithful reflect of her affective life — since she has already made clear that she finds it hard to speak it out — it is just the only symbolic resource she has been granted to signify her experience. Interestingly, her impulse to name the affective happens retroactively, as if her *unreal* and *disorderly* experiences could only be re-presented this way:

Those *unreal* and *disorderly*, bright yet transparent objects took on concrete form with curves and twists: two oversized, swollen objects like resplendent, drooping breasts [...]. It's a woman's body, a curvaceous woman's body! She wanted to shout as the astonishing *realization* set in. (Li Ang 1997, 182)

These unnamed objects that float in her dreams produce a pleasurable sensation in her that, after she cognizes their affective charge, she comes to the *realization* that they belong to a woman's body. Like before, in the Chinese version there is not such a *realization*, only “an astonishment that almost made her shout out [shout out what she was looking at, the formless objects congealing in the figure of a woman's body]”. I feel that the addition of the word *realization* in this sentence fortuitously reinforces the objective, concrete nature of the dreamed objects as the body of a woman. The retrospective timeline of this *realization* — or rather understanding — is very much in line with Klein's ideas on the role of symbolism, which for her comes to be “*the foundation* of all phantasy and sublimation but, more than that, [...] the basis of the subject's relation to the outside world and to reality in general” (Klein 1988, 221). According to this, my argument is that, having had her first attempts to signify her feelings abjected by shame, there is for the character a non-logical — from the point of view of a stable sexual identity — connection between her semiotic impulses and the object of her

yearnings that is now working at *the foundation* of her phantasy. The doll and the breasts on the woman's body she dreams of, both standing as limited signifiers of her otherwise much richer affective forces, have been introjected as objects in her phantasy and conform the ways in which she relates and makes sense of herself in the world.

The protagonist's wishful impulses, which according to my argument are unable to acquire signification within the symbolic, neither in the figure of the doll nor in the breasts, are introverted towards her dreams and praying and "her nightly dreams [become] invaded by peculiar transparent objects floating in a vast grayness, *divorced from reality*" (Li Ang 1997, 180). This *divorce from reality* would be allowed by the very same means that abject her wishes. Following my interpretation, shame, by abjecting her feelings, also preserves them in herself as a potential source of enjoyment with the only difference that now, they are not equated to any external object and need to be signified in a different — non-real — way in her phantasy. The fact that the protagonist's phantasy is affected by shame and her semiotic pulses don't find a stable object to equate with, allows the emergence of a subject that relates to what Klein calls reality in a fluid way, always in process and always already acted on by the workings of shame. It is in these dreams and in her praying that I suggest she exercises some sort of agential wishing.

These dreams and delusions would provide a site for the affective force that first congealed in the doll and afterwards in her husband's flat chest. My reading is that these "unreal and disorderly, bright yet transparent objects" (Li Ang 1997, 182) that resemble a woman's breasts start becoming her objects of desire within her phantasy. Eventually, these floating objects would appear in the shape of a "mysterious man-beast" (Li Ang 1997, 189) whose main



characteristic is having two pale green eyes.<sup>15</sup> This inward move of the character, who resorts to her dreams to abandon the world of signification — and to some extent the real — in a way that is not supported by the methods of the repressive logos, allows a new codification of her phantasy, which in line with Klein and other analysts is now perceived as having a concrete existence (Abend 1990, 61). I am arguing that the protagonist would now attempt an approximation to meaning — which is organized by the semiotic— through the pre-objectal components of her phantasy. She will thereby turn her back to signification as allowed by the symbolic and will take the transparent objects and the monster in her dreams as her self-tailored objects of desire.<sup>16</sup> These are objects that would allow meaning without asking for an external referent. Instead, she would now focus on the wishes that shame was both repressing and preserving to reunite with the abjected in a pre-objectal site, free from the constraints of a way of making meaning through signification and tumbling over into “non-sense or the impossible real” (Kristeva 1982, 10-12).

## 2.5 | On the pale green eyed monster

In the previous sections, along with the concept of phantasy and its potential for pushing imagination towards the future, I have exposed the reasons why I consider that “Curvaceous Dolls” serves as a reminder that oppression starts in the apparatus through which meaning is acquired in a logocentric system. In the following lines, I will develop the way in which the final turn of the story combines these two lines of my argument. This happens when the

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15 Interestingly enough, the eyes are the site of the taboo in psychoanalysis (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 145). So we might say that Li Ang is indeed writing about taboo in this story. Not a taboo that refers to an unspeakable concept but to one that lacks its very sign.

16 Kristeva (1995) distinguishes between the semiotic meaning, “which consists of drive-related and affective meaning organized according to primary processes whose sensory aspects are often nonverbal” and (linguistic) signification, that entails linguistic signs and a logico-syntactic organization that belong to the symbolic (Kristeva 1995, 104-105). Within the symbolic, the relationship between signifier and signified, referent and affective meaning, need to follow a logocentric logic whereas in the imaginary level of the semiotic meaning, the logic regulating this relationship can be dismissed.

protagonist, by praying for her husband to grow a pair of breasts, works outside the logic of signification and does so from a dislocation of meaning from referent, affect from object, and signified from signifier. Her impulse for enjoyment can't be said to be linked anymore to an external and predictable object of desire. Instead, it flows freer from cognition in her dreams, making itself visible in random moments, when it gets fixed to any of the objects previously incorporated into her phantasy.

When she starts having mysterious dreams, she describes them as “unreal and disorderly”, she visualizes “transparent objects” that take concrete forms “with curves and twists” (Li Ang 1997, 182) and the dream usually ends with the *realization/understanding* that she was dreaming about a woman's curvaceous body. She derives sexual pleasure from these first dreams, “an unprecedented warmth that spread slowly from her breasts to the rest of her body” (Li Ang 1997, 182). She is nevertheless aware of the fact that she is dreaming, and always wakes up to find out that she is lying by her husband. I find that as the story develops, her desire acquires a more passionate and urgent character, asking for a more prevailing role of the semiotic over the symbolic. According to my argument, the somatic feeling that these dreams grant her reinforces the affective in her phantasy through the iteration of pleasures that I have been naming semiotic discourse. Reinforcing certain aspects of her phantasy only makes it more likely that they will be brought up again as a valid template to signify a conscious or unconscious experience.

She spends the days in “constant prayer and anticipation”, remembering the days when she would hide in an underground air-raid shelter and cover “her clay doll's lustrous skin with kisses” (Li Ang 1997, 185). At this point shame, repression and the affective impulse meet in time and space: “kissing her doll was perfectly proper, nothing to be ashamed of” (Li Ang

1997, 186). It is then when she realizes that she can develop her enjoyment when she is not being seen: “How she wished her home to have a cellar, a room unknown to others, a dark place where she could hide” (Li Ang 1997, 186). When this longing for a secret site is made conscious, she starts feeling nostalgic about her hometown and the sugarcane patches that provided her “an infinite number of hiding places” (Li Ang 1997, 186). In a quick dialogue full of short sentences, she tells her husband that she wants to go back home. “Why?” — he asks; “No reason” is her reply (Li Ang 1997, 186). She confesses she doesn’t know the reason and feels that “defending herself [is] meaningless and futile” (Li Ang 1997, 187). She is characterized, once again, as unable to convey through reason or words her yearning for a space outside the regulations of compulsory signification, my interpretation implies that she has already started undoing herself and allowing the creation of a space for something different. Her husband’s hands, that were once the source of “unimaginable pleasure”, have become insufficient to assure the fulfillment of her wishes for warmth and solace, which prompts her to pray with increased devotion for him to grow breasts; “a more primitive kind of supplication was called for” (Li Ang 1997, 187). To follow this need for a more primitive supplication, in the absence of her husband, she would undress herself, imagining an unknown force looking at her while she kneels on the floor, “a tingling sensation like a mild electric shock occurred wherever her limbs touched the icy floor” (Li Ang 1997, 188). Her praying becoming, not only a hopeful supplication for a desired future, but the means through which to sense it. They gradually turn into a kind of affective encounter between her and the abjected within herself. This is how I argue that she literally turns to a way of creating meaning that does not require the external sign, propelled by her husband shaming behaviors, she resorts to the semiotic to give sense to her inner world in a somatic way, which in the very process, also fulfills her bodily yearnings. She thereby reappropriates her phantasy and

reproduces it in a way that the reader cannot say is only affected by her past experiences, but after its recodification, it also becomes the means through which she imagines an alternative future where her wishes and pleasures are more easily satisfied. The following quotation shows one of her prayings and the way in which she comes in contact with her phantasy in a semiotic way. Regardless of the external world and its objects, my reading is that she turns inwards and literally immerses herself in her abjected phantasy:

Her husband remained ignorant of what was going on, so everything proceeded smoothly, except that now a strange creature began to creep into her prayers. [...] Those eyes, expressionless and filled with a peculiar incomprehension, watched her; but since the creature's very existence was dubious, it had no effect on the fervor of her performance. She embraced the icy floor, kissing it with the vague sense that she was embracing a lover sculpted out of marble. [...]

Under the gaze of those eyes, she lay back and exposed herself to their enshrouding vision. She had completed a new rite of baptism.

This may have been the moment she had been waiting for all along; it surpassed her marble lover and the obsession with the hoped-for-breasts on her husband's chest. She was rocked and pounded by the waves of a profound, unfathomable happiness, which also turned the pale green eyes into a placid lake. [...] Her happiness was compressed into a single drop of water, which fell without warning into the pale green lake and spread outward until every atom of her being had taken on a pale green cast. After that she felt herself reemerging whole from the bottom of the lake. (Li Ang 1997, 188,189)

I suggest that this passage condenses her process of turning into a different way of making sense of her wishes and desires. Keeping her husband ignorant of everything she assures that there won't be anyone imposing any sign on her experience. Moreover, the eyes, a metaphor for the phallus and taboo in psychoanalysis suggests here a free encounter with the abjected

affective “in part because of the unique capacity of the look-look with respect to the expression, communication, contagion, escalation, and control of affects.” (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 144, 145). “The taboo on mutual looking”, which “is reinforced by its specific linkage with sexuality” (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 145) is in this scene faced by the protagonist. The eyes start creeping into her praying and all of a sudden, they sublime and become liquid. They stop being an external gaze trying to make sense of her and become an enshrouding happiness, a placid lake from the bottom of which she reemerges. The abjected desire that by means of shame was meant to construct the borders of a normative subjectivity in her (Kristeva 1982, 4) is now a phantasy that resembles a non-object: a green eyed monster. It is in the phantastic figure of this monster that, while praying or dreaming, an assemblage of shamed practices and affects are brought together.<sup>17</sup> The character, who was depicted as trying to find meaningful objects for her affective impulses in the outside, has turn inwards and finds the impossible within, an impossible that is inherently part of her being and is depicted as a fluid that embraces her in her own happiness, that has “spread outward until every atom of her being had taken on a pale green cast” (Li Ang 1997, 189)<sup>18</sup>. She and the monster are made of the same non-object, fluid-like abjection.

Shame — as an affect — has a pre-ideological semiotic component, and the monster — as the non-object of abjection — conserves the remnants of a pre-objectal relationship, prior to meaning and subject and ruled by the affective.<sup>19</sup> In that territory, affects and representations don’t follow the logic that Klein advocates for, and the protagonist, by subverting the logical

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17 Kristeva describes abjection as “a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives (Kristeva 1984, 9, 10).

18 For Kristeva, the abject is experienced when the subject, tired of attempting to identify with something in the outside, “finds the impossible within” and realizes that it is the abject what is at the foundations of its being (Kristeva 1984, 5).

19 Kristeva talks about abjection as preserving the pre-objectal relationship, the remnants of a moment when signified things haven’t become yet and affect is ruling (Kristeva 1984, 10).

relationship between signifier and referent, had been taking herself back to the foundational moment of her self (Kristeva 1982, 11). This encounter with the monster stresses the violence of the symbolic in a way that is not fully conveyed in the English translation where, when she regains consciousness, she feels humiliated, and “struck by the knowledge that her body, which she had always thought of as incomparably alluring, was in fact just another body; for the first time in a long while she realized that she was merely a woman, no different from any other, with neither more nor fewer womanly attributes” (Li Ang 1997, 189). In Chinese, she thinks of her body as incomparably alluring too<sup>20</sup> but what is unexpected<sup>21</sup> is not that it is just another body, is the fact that it’s *useless*.<sup>22</sup> An important sentence for my argument is missing in the English version: “She is merely a woman, a woman like any other, *doomed* to be so.”<sup>23</sup> The connotation that the usage of the word *doomed/destined* (zhùdìng 注定) in a passive construction conveys is that of an existence that has been imposed, as if even the signification of her self as woman was someone else’s plan she could not fight against. The translation, which proceeds saying that she has “neither more nor fewer *womanly attributes*” blends two different sentences from the Chinese version in the phrase *womanly attributes*. In these two missing sentences I find the reasons why the character is not special in comparison to other women: “she is not more special than others [women], neither more unique nor *disgraced*<sup>24</sup> [literally ‘*low and degrading*’]”. The character seems to understand women as having being *doomed* to exist as such by an active force and she is no better than any other in her uniqueness or misery. By just saying *womanly attributes* in the English version, the reader misses the details of what being a woman means for the protagonist: a sort of need to be

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20 “無限誘惑”

21 “竟然”

22 “毫不能發生效用。”

23 “她也只不過是一個女人，一個像任何被注定是女人的女人。”

24 “毫不特殊，不比她們稀有，也不比她們低賤。”

comparatively special or unique to stand out among the others but also, an existence grounded to some extent in a *disgraced/low and degraded* reality.

Going back to the monster, the abjected and the role of shame, it seems that in the case of the story, shame is what, due to its affective nature, serves as vehicle for a regression in the development of the subject that eventually, subverts the *low and degraded* grounds of her being. To understand this better, I have drawn into readings of Tomkins that claim that affects acquire meaning only after being cognized and always preserve a substrate of non-subjective, bodily nature (Sedgwick and Parker 1995, 133). This is why I argue that in the story, shame — as a bodily sensation — can serve the purpose of de-subjectifying the character. Shame would allow her to step back to that prior moment when the affect hasn't got any meaning, to the instant when she realizes that “kissing her clay doll was perfectly proper, nothing to be ashamed of” (Li Ang 1997, 186). That would be a moment in the subject's development when the rupture of the world into objects hasn't yet happened and shame would have not yet been so central in her phantasy. At that point, there would be no objects and no subject per se, only a desire that will be foundational for all of them (Kristeva 1982, 5). The non-object that I interpret as the monster, would occupy the site of the abjected, signaling that a process of signification was attempted — hence the abjection that she refers to as *low and degraded*. The abjected would be sublimated<sup>25</sup> in its phantastic figure as the impossible that through shame, shows the way to a pre-subjective semiotic realm.

She believed that the pale green eyes, with their primitive lust, were capable of bringing her happiness and release. She craved them, and in order to have them

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<sup>25</sup> “Sublimation” is Kristeva's concept, who defines it as “the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal. [...] Through sublimation I kept [the object] under control. The object is edged with the sublime” (Kristeva 1984, 11).

she had to do as they dictated. The vast sugarcane fields of her hometown spread in all directions, layer upon layer, dark and unfathomable.

She knew there would be countless pale green eyes staring at her in the heart of the sugarcane fields, that there would be countless tails stroking her limbs, that there would be white feathers filling her vagina, that there would be gleaming white fangs biting down on her nipples. But it was a sweet, dark place, *boundless and eternally dark*, a place to hide. She longed for all this, she longed to possess it; nothing else mattered. She yearned for her hometown and for sugarcane fields in which she could hide. [...]

‘I want to go back [...], I want to *go back home*’ (Li Ang 1997, 196).

In the quotation above I find the possibility to read her as resignifying the abjected without the impositions of the external in a pre-subjective semiotic realm. The semiotic, devoid of significance, would have the potential to bring her happiness and pleasure, and by enhancing this phantasy in her dreams, she starts changing the significance of her life. I read the character as realizing that the feelings she is looking for can only be obtained if she moves away from the restrictive symbolic world imposed on her through shame, under this logic, she needs to hide where no gaze except for her own abjection can see her. She longs to be in a *boundless and eternally dark place*, where no object can be projected on her as container of her affective pulses. My own deduction is that this going back to the subject’s threshold of signification and her wish to be the only master in the process is expressed by her yearning for *going back home* to the sugarcane fields. The uncommon arrangements taking place in her phantasy that I suggest are motivated by her sense of dissatisfaction with her situation and allowed by the affective, prompt her to imagine a future that would take her far from her discontent. Her affected phantasy thereby opens the possibility for her to change the here and now, to project herself to a different there and then.



At the end of the story she is portrayed as resolving that her dreams will always leave her “searching and waiting. Yet she wanted to seize it [the white liquid in her dreams], for she believed that it offered her the only hope of attaining a kind of solace, a truth that would allow her to offer up everything in tribute. In the dim light, she set off on a search, not concerned that her husband might oppose her, for she was *convinced* that this was her only way out” (Li Ang 1997, 197, 198). Although she is portrayed as *convinced* to start a search away from where she is, in the next paragraph she opens her eyes, leaving the reader with the doubt of whether the whole story was a dream and without clarifying whether she had actually told her husband about her plans to leave. Only one thing is stated again, as a sort of reminder of the repression taking place in phallogocentrism and to reinforce what I have been interpreting as an inward escape that affects the character’s future outside phantasy. When her husband — presumably not knowing what she had been dreaming about — tells her: “‘work hard at it, no matter how long it takes, and someday it will happen’”; to which she answers back: “‘maybe’ [...] ‘but not if I do it your way. I have to go it alone’” (Li Ang 1997, 198).

## Conclusion

Many modern and contemporary feminist authors have already pointed to the castrating effects that the regime of the signifier has in women's creative works. The boundless quotidian affective event of their characters always being split in intelligible components, deprived of a richer significance to favor some sort of truth or any other kind of taxonomical fiction. So these authors have, from Hélène Cixous to Doris Lessing, often guided their female protagonists to a dark, empty space with the purpose of allowing them a bottomless experience of themselves, a place that for Li Ang's character "felt safe, for the darkness was free of all objects" (Li Ang 1997, 190). In this paper I have argued that this is a place that should not be enlightened. On the contrary, I have proposed to read these unfit or queer characters, that in the Taiwanese context are often abjected and thereby incorporated in discourses of normalization and modernity or decadence and modernity, from within their penumbra, from the very impossibility of their desire. Thus, my purpose has not been to push out into visibility characters that I think do not belong to the here and now of identity politics, but to give account of their affective experiences without foreclosing their unfolding under the rules of the sign.

Knowing that any generalization made to apply my findings to the broader fields of world feminist literatures or critical translation studies should require further research, I have only carried out the proposed affective reading with the English translation of Li Ang's short story "Curvaceous Dolls" to find that not only does the perception of an affective event prepare its future representation in the symbolic, but the semiotic character of an experience also contains in itself the potential to resignify the meaning of the event in phantasy and this way,

to affect the real. The aim of my theoretical framework has been to investigate the ways in which this feedback system between the subject's phantasy and the external might be affected. By realizing that external reality is not only *internalized* — as in psychoanalysis — but often *imposed* and projected — via disgust and shame — my thesis has aimed to account for the nuanced ways in which the real acquires its significance as such only as a result of the imposition of phantasy. A phantasy that in “Curvaceous Dolls”, I have understood as acting under the regulation of the phallogocentric system of meaning production. The gendered power imbalance this implies, although affects the process of subjectification of the female character, is nevertheless subverted in phantasy, thanks to the pre-symbolic and pre-objectal quality of the semiotic charges.

My analysis shows that significance, when looking at the level of the semiotic meaning of the signified, lacks consistency and can be subverted. I have argued that, by virtue of its indiscriminated openness, the affective system troubles any attempt to ossify the received semiotic meanings. This is why, although for the sake of visibility and intelligibility some literary critics have ascribed to Li Ang's character a consolidated (repressed) lesbian identity — implying a full equation of her semiotic discourse with the symbolic — I have nevertheless remained skeptical to the erasures of the nuanced textures of her desire that this decoding in conceptual terms would entail. Instead, I have suggested that, since according to this aesthetics of desire as a consolidated entity everything that can possibly be felt already has been given a name, what can't be named can't possibly exist but in a sort of floating state, waiting for its object to acquire significance. Thus, I have called it floating signified and based on it, I have tried to open the discussion to query on what is missing from favoring only an identity based interpretation of the story while considering the reasons for doing so.

The floating signified is abjected in the story, and thereby incorporated into the already affected phantasy of the female character who I suggest, makes use of the signifying power of the semiotic to decode and resignify it. It is in the protagonist's unsatisfied yet wishful impulse towards the future where I have sensed "that thing that let's us feel this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (Muñoz 2009, 1), and in her use of phantasy, the theoretical possibility to propel our longings onward. As I have shown in the story, phantasy can be conceived as a mental structure designing a phantastic reality for the subject that, by defining the ways in which she understands the external real, actually affects the way her reality unfolds. This way, I have suggested a stretching of Klein's concept to deploy it as a speculative tool for imagining utopian futurities.

Although future inquiries into literary utopias from the affective reading I propose should engage with Muñoz (2009) understanding of queer utopia and Bloch's (1995) ideas on hope in a more in-depth manner, what I can humbly point out at this stage are the affinities of my conceptualization of phantasy with their proposals. Opening up "Curvaceous Dolls" text to readings that differ from the aesthetics of reticent tolerance not only breaks with the homophobic interpretation of it, but it also combines efforts with the aforementioned authors to pose a threat to the broader modern aesthetics of desire. A structure that, in agreeing with them, I think supports a regime of naturalized ossified fictions in the subject — such as sexual identity, which is conceived as an inextricable piece of us — for the purpose of reproducing further fictional components in the social body; something that, I believe, limits the potential for freedom that our own affects could provide. As a sort of revolt against this, I have put forward a subject conceptualized within the framework of the affective, the singular, the complex, to avoid having to use a restricted concept of phantasy that only allows to imagine

within an aesthetic framework that I see as a regulatory device hindering the proliferation of infinite subjectivities.

Although in fairness with the benefits that identity politics has brought to minorities in Taiwan and elsewhere, I nevertheless want to present this text as an invitation for a conceptualization of desire that resists its ossification into an identity. As I have outlined, the monolithic character of this taxonomical system of categorization not only represents a contingent way of considering sexuality and desire, it also supports the mechanism of meaning production of the straight mind. The traces of desire that are symbolically congealed in an identity category presuppose a world of consolidated objects, of expected temporal and objectal consistency. Following research could investigate the relationship between this interpretation of desire in Taiwanese literature from the late 70's and the urgency for materialization of one of the fictions implied in the paragraph above: that of the modern nation-state of Taiwan itself. As I have exposed, several texts from this period, although suitable for both an identity-based and an affective reading, have been nevertheless utilized by the Western discourse on modernity for its own reproduction. Their characters, either acquiring a sexual identity or being read as abnormal have been stabilized and abjected to serve the purpose of constructing Taiwan as a stable entity; either as a tolerant progressive state in contrast with the allegedly unenlightened neighboring China, or as a territory with a lengthy and distinctive tradition regulating moral issues. Both approaches serving the same purpose of delimitating boundaries and consolidating the modern idea of the nation-state.

In reaching to my conclusion it has been important to mind the character's longing for a sweet, dark place and how, although she temporarily finds it in her husband's eyes or alone in her bedroom, she nevertheless keeps her yearning for it in restless motion. This way, and

although the detailed accounts of the there and then of that shadowy site she is trying to imagine are yet to be researched, I think my thesis can contribute to the mobilization of such a theorization with a speculative framework for this kind of future-bound imagination engendered from within the penumbra of the semiotic.

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