

BOOK REVIEW

Remaindered Life

Neferti X.M. Tadiar. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022 (ISBN 978-1-478-01776-9)

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Neferti X.M. Tadiar's *Remaindered Life* (2022) is a comprehensive and theoretically robust reframing of our global political present in terms of the oppositional and ongoing struggles of being human and “becoming-human” in a time of permanent war. Tadiar's goal is to expound on the complex processes shaping global capitalism, broadening our current globalist framework to attend to and encapsulate the life-wasting and -making that occurs outside the bounds of human value-making. What is significant in Tadiar's approach is not only an imaginative reworking of the dynamics of contemporary capitalism in a distinctly global frame, but also the attention paid to the *lived* dimensions of these dynamics, explored through the ongoing decolonizing struggle of the colonized and the disposable life-times of the Global South. Tadiar's perspective is focused on “remaindered life,” referring to “the modalities of living that exceed the necessary reproduction of the becoming-human as a resource of disposable life for capital” (14). Shaped by the waste- and surplus-making activities of contemporary capitalism,¹ remaindered life stems from the excess created in surpassing the distinction between life worth living and life worth expending.

Remaindered Life is a book of vast academic scope, one that evolves along the lines of multiple theoretical domains/topics (Marxist theory, Decolonial theory, Critical Race Studies, Migration Studies, Feminist Theory, Critical Resistance Studies/Globalization, International and Third World Feminisms). She frames this not as a historical narrative or political treatise, but as stories that highlight the excess labor and life-times of capitalism's disposable and dispossessed populations. Her stories take place along the lines of shifting sociopolitical contexts, histories, and populations (Mexican migrants at the U.S. Mexico border, Filipina domestic workers overseas, U.S. prison populations, and refugees of numerous identities and nationalities).

Notably, the explicit *narrative* framing of the central project of this book is articulated in the preface: *Remaindered Life*, Tadiar explains, “retells the story of the global capitalist present that is often told as the story of capitalist restructuring in response to workers' struggles in the Global North, with the resulting innovations of capitalist

exploitation and value production spreading to the Global South” (X). Vital to the arguments of this book is its scope, which eschews isolationist frameworks in place of the globalist. The story of globalization that Tadiar tells draws on the lives and conditions of the ignored, the unaccentuated, the expelled, the dispossessed—they are the remaindered. Tadiar’s version of globalization is centered on exposing the already-extant and yet ignored forms of life and life-making of the persons, groups, or nations that are understood by those in the Global North as not only producers of but also physical referents of “waste.” Additionally, as Tadiar primes us at the outset, it is also a story of a distinctly feminist character. As Tadiar writes in the introduction of her book,

“[t]he analytical and political tale I tell is a *feminist* story long understood and told by the colonized, especially those harnessed by means of punishment for sex-gendered reproductive labors put to the furtherance of capital life, who are at the same time left to see to the social reproduction and care of their own shared life of belonging” (xi, emphasis mine).

Remaindered Life is composed of five parts, each “dwelling on a major theme or situation and foregrounding a set of conceptual figures and interpretive codes for understanding the phenomena of disposability and surplus life-making in particular contemporary sociohistorical contexts” (xiii). As Tadiar stipulates in the preface, “[e]ach part can be read independently of the others, as an exploration of one aspect of a larger global situation” (xiii). The only exception to Tadiar’s suggestion might be for readers wanting an introduction to the notions of value, waste, and remainder that are, in diverse ways, continually drawn on throughout the book.

Part I, “In a Time of War,” assesses the global present shaped by social reproduction and capitalism, the unfinished project of decolonization, and the disposability of human life. The thrust of Tadiar’s argument is that we are living in a time of perpetual imperial war, one that Tadiar frames according to the adversarial relationship between the Global North whose populations are engaged in “the war to be human” or *stay* human,² and the Global South, whose populations are engaged in the struggle of “becoming human in a time of war” or the war to *become* human (5). In tracing the Global South’s struggle for human status from colonialism to the present, Tadiar argues that the legacy of colonialism that is operative today necessitates a historical reframing of decolonialization as an unfinished project.

Part II, “Life-Times,” explores how surplus populations are affected by their relationship to labor, disposability, and survival. Challenging the dominant life-as-labor paradigm advanced in post-Marxist analyses of contemporary capitalism, Tadiar encourages a more comprehensive understanding of the economic activities that shape our daily lives. This requires us to consider not just the productive activities that add value to society, but also the devaluing life activities that are often carried out by disenfranchised populations. Through this shift from life-times of production to life-times of disposability, previously illegible life-activities, life-forms, and life-times become legible. In this sense, life-times of disposability go beyond a simplistic formulation of capitalist waste or that which resists its expenditure as such but involves the “made, lived, played, and played out” dimensionalities of life and life-making (100). To provide us a way to attend life-times beyond and underneath the scope of the theoretical subsumption of social reproduction within global capitalism, Tadiar points us to practices of “fate playing,”³ Fate-playing can be used to describe acts of immigration on the US-Mexico border and is also explored here by Tadiar to describe the illicit informal

practices to the act of “changing-land” (*pangingibang-lupa*) of Filipina migrants, as well as the illicit informal practices of Filipino slum dwellers.

Part III, “Globopolis,” looks at the processes and features of urbanist expansion in globopolitical life through the emergence of the globalist metropolis. As Tadiar notes, the metropolitan drive at the heart of the emergent globopolis, the global fantasy of “city everywhere,” is the logic of uber-urbanization. Using the example of Metro Manila, Tadiar charts the growth of Manila into a metropolis of high-value global life through developments of urban innovation and infrastructure made possible through increasingly faster circulation, flow, and mobility. As one of the many communication-transportation projects of global circulation, expressways—as conduits of urbanization as well as value-productive, techno-infrastructure sites of circulation—are platforms of reconstituted urban life on a global scale. In Manila, as in other emerging metropolises in the Global South, expressways perform the sublation of the once-rural province to the now world-wide uber-metropolis and, in doing so, become the sites of production and connection defining city anywhere.

Tadiar explores the “world class” investor fantasy of uber-urbanization as a mediacosm that operates along the lines of “access.” Within the envisioned mediacosm, the forms and hierarchies of access act as new modes of value extraction that, along with social regulation, form the basis of urban life’s new, fractal expansion. Here, Tadiar moves to extend the metropolitan archipelago form. What was once conceived as the metropolitan form is now a global platform that converts pools of human excess into forms of surplus liquidity “that have been crucial to new modes of value extraction attendant to the latest, financialized cycle of capitalist accumulation” (148). This insight has significance for urban studies. Using the language of infrastructure and platforms—terms not equated but used with a “theoreticopolitical distinction” (169)—as sites of vital practice of life activities (those belonging to the already-human) invite Tadiar’s suggestion that at the machinic core of such structures lie the strata of disposable populations whose non-human labor animates the machine of global metropolitan life.

Part IV, “Dead Exchanges” (chapters 8–10), aims to understand the war to be human through the uses, capabilities, and dispensations of power. Looking at how freedom and democracy function as code-scripts in creating the global infrastructure of capital, Tadiar crafts the term “dead exchange” to name discussions about freedoms that do not lead to any real change. Tadiar explores this concept through the powers and logics of expending life by the Filipino state under Duarte’s regime. The final chapter of this section looks at the artistic contributions of RESBAK, a coalition of artists that arose in protest and response to Duterte’s war on drugs. In upholding collective life, Tadiar positions RESBACK as an example of how state-targeted populations can use the modality of remaindered life to push back against state violence and global capitalist enterprise. That this mode of political and social rebellion is taking place in a specifically artistic context is also noteworthy; indeed, the political possibilities offered by art are something that Tadiar is interested in, returning to it in the following section.

Part V, “By the Waysides,” shifts our focus toward the forms of art and perception that exist on the “wayside,” the spaces of leftover life in our contemporary capitalist world. Here, Tadiar highlights the work of artists in these invisible spots, offering a model for paying attention to the excess of survival over disposability. Here Tadiar explores the representation of and resistance to the violence of capitalist value-making in art through the video installations and paintings of a Filipino artist named Lyra Garcellano Tadiar also looks at a group of filmmakers in the Global South, including Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Tsai Ming-liang, who similarly express the same

forms of bypass and splendor in their films and paintings. Tadiar suggests that even when a work meditates on or attends to the life destined toward waste, there remains a surplus, meaning that there is still space for imaginative gestures or other generative forces to take place—this is what Tadiar calls “splendor.” Tadiar’s purpose is to reframe the experience of those historically destined for expenditure and extinction not in terms of disaster, failure, or catastrophe, but in terms that expose the creative practices and potentialities of survivance and regeneration. The practices taking place in the waysides of urban life are of great importance, Tadiar suggests, in our present moment: a moment where disaster looms over the global metropolis, pointing toward radical change, one that spells capitalism’s end. As the tools and capabilities for life-making under duress become more valuable, Tadiar suggests that we can expect a reconfiguration of the global order that centers remaindered life, surplus lives, and embodied experiences, practices, and other life-making practices of those in the wasteland.

Remaindered Life’s global frameworks and nuanced understandings of contemporary capitalism provide insights applicable worldwide, but readers should note that the case studies mainly revolve around South-Asian political and historical contexts. Given that the Philippines is an area of Tadiar’s personal academic expertise, such forays are well-founded.⁴ However, the examples provided are not singular pairings with the author’s concepts, but rather serve a multiplicity of connections and explanations of our contemporary political moment. The book’s globalist aims are consistent with the sustained examples of these concepts in a national context. The framing of the global present in the book provides an antagonistic relationship, highlighting the conflict between Global North vs. Global South. This positionality allows us to extend and extrapolate the Philippines’ contexts and case studies backward, seeing them as one but not the only exemplar of the Global South’s lived experiences and political circumstances. The author’s work is built on the theoretical formulations of Sylvia Wynter, whose concepts form a bedrock for the author’s work.⁵ Like Wynter, Tadiar is also a systems-thinker, and her concepts emerge and re-emerge, are layered and interwoven, and move beyond the bounds of simple binaries.

Insofar as Tadiar’s approach takes care to lift, uncover, and explore disposability through the vantage point of peoples, activists, and artists located in the Global South, this book is a much-needed and commendable model for how to think through practices of capital accumulation and disposability in ways that also encapsulate and do justice to the embodied dimensionalities, potentialities, and modalities that dispossessed populations can and do take—even in the onslaught of violence, settler-colonialist practices, or other oppressive forces that comprise contemporary capitalism in our current moment. *Remaindered Life* is essential reading for those interested in understanding global capitalism through a human lens and those looking for a postcolonial feminist approach to sowing hope through possibility and envisioning alternative, radical futures in a post-capitalist world.

Notes

1 According to Tadiar, the *surplus-making function* of capitalism is used here to denote, in more specific terms, the accumulation of capital and capital’s subsistence on social reproduction—that which results in a surplus or excess.

2 Human is conceived here through value; rather than a universal status, humanity is a status or valuation that is earned or achieved.

3 Fate playing, Tadiar explains, is “a cosmic gamble for those whom life can be parceled out, bought sold, traded, stolen, or given away, a wasted end, a deepening debt, and liability,” or, in other words, “a fate determined by forces far beyond one’s grasp and control, yet never completely fixed or immutable, and instead always in a dynamic state of play” (100).

4 Tadiar’s former books have historically explored issues of feminism, postcoloniality and globalization in the context of Southeast Asia, specifically the Philippines. See Tadiar 2004 and 2009.

5 The question of the human and thinking through how the decolonized may become human is an animate discussion that runs throughout Wynter’s corpus. See Wynter 1984, 1995, and 2003.

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