are not uniform, and that there may be a hidden, even decadent pleasure in analyzing and denouncing global inequality—from afar. Meanwhile, however, inequality grows. Cosmopolitan irony registers this fact—it can see the disciple and the prophet for what they are—but offers little in the way of consolation: "Over a double espresso he said, 'I hate the phrase "late capitalism." Maybe it's actually very early.'" There are two jokes here. The first is on the speaker: his wit itself is a luxury item whose existence depends on the economic system he laughingly dismisses. And the second joke is on us: capitalism is probably not going anywhere any time soon.

Is Stonecipher critiquing the myopia of the Western consumer who complains about Marxist jargon even as his actions confirm the force of its critique? Or is this cosmopolitan free of utopian illusion, an unlikely hero? These poems are preoccupied with the nuances of such ambiguities, and the neutrality of their language at times makes them difficult to interpret, as one of her speakers acknowledges:

> She wrote, I want to be seen through. He wrote, But you are deliberately opaque. She wrote, I want people to want to work hard to see through my (really quite superficial) opacity. He wrote nothing back. She waited, but he wrote nothing back.

This cosmopolitan wants her readers to "work hard"—but why should we? What is her position? Is it cynical? Worldly? Critical? Detached? Engaged? These poems can sometimes seem like instances of the very superficiality they seek elsewhere to overturn. Yet even in this opaque moment, Stonecipher's indirections and ironies exemplify a rich, critical self-consciousness.

Justin Parks

§

Linh Dinh, *Some Kind of Cheese Orgy*. Tucson: Chax Press, 2009. 128pp. $16

Linh Dinh, *Love Like Hate*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010. 240pp. $16.95

Reading the poems in *Some Kind of Cheese Orgy*, I was reminded of the increasingly hysterical prose Linh Dinh has recently been writing for the leftist newsletter and website *CounterPunch*. "Pissed Off Zombies," for example, rails about Americans' complicity in imperialist violence and their eagerness for more of the "snuff show that's Iraq." It would work well in paragraphs. Meanwhile the novel *Love Like Hate* imports a phrase from one of Dinh's

poems, "gone in body but held in smell," referring to animals missing from zoos that have seen better days. Abject or violent bodies and minds, economic and psychosocial degradation: these are Dinh's subjects regardless of genre.

Dinh should not count as an "experimental" writer and surely doesn't care about the category. His journalism is more occasional than his poems, as one would expect, even if the same voice animates both. Some of his poems suggest Roman epigrams fitted with a penis pump. *Love Like Hate* recalls the naturalist line of Frank Norris, but its characters, grotesque types mostly, are drawn more realistically than that. Dinh notes near the end of *Some Kind of Cheese Orgy* that the Vietnamese verb *cuòi* ("to laugh, smile, or chuckle") is used to name many kinds of laughter. We need a few of these to appreciate Dinh's work, and perhaps a belief (to borrow from Mark Twain and Ed Dorn) that "only laughter can blow it to rags."

Dinh's poems express the sadomasochism he criticizes in the culture: "The gods forgot to fart me off the map yesterday." There is nothing polite about these poems, whether he is ventriloquizing an obnoxious view or criticizing it. Americans are too passive, he thinks, except when the anonymity of the internet encourages them to spill their bile. He won't make the same mistake in his poems, even if his disgust and the targets of his satire and critique risk becoming predictable. I prefer the poems at their least prolix—the shorter poems in this book but especially the epigrams that open *Borderless Bodies* (2005): "He sang not of breasts / but of breastbones." The third-person voice helps, and also the more traditional diction; the poetry is more pointed here, simpler. By comparison, *Some Kind of Cheese Orgy* tilts toward modes as exaggerated and cartoonish as the book's cover images: "My prick has a name. My wife and I call him / Shaquille."

If most of American culture is kitsch, as Dinh seems to believe—Vietnamese culture too—one naturally wonders what he makes of poetry (and "poetry culture"). His title poem suggests an answer: "As soon as I got off the boat, I stepped on a slice of cheese. / The cheese is cheesier here, the non-cheese also cheesier." High-minded poetry does well to admit its limits: "I Mug You Very Much" begins, "If every poem were as bad / As this one, I don't wanna / Be a moonshining wordsmith." A few of Dinh's titles suggest a related skepticism: "Last Poem, I Promise," "Quietly Boiling Poem ($40)." Meanwhile "Beyond Stupid" mocks the tendency of poets to make idiotic statements like, "Sometimes I want to go to prison… / So I'll have all the time to write." The same kind of poet admires the audience poetry had in the Soviet Union.

"What a Wand" takes up Auden's famous line about poetry making nothing happen, first by listing impossible, clichéd goals for poetry (e.g., "heal / The universe"), and then by admitting that "99.99 percent of poetry is a sham" before venturing a more serious definition of poetry's function:

A chance porthole into the real,
A glancing clarification, more
Than just horizontal euphony,
Poetry still feels false within
The context of this slammer
Of mushy minds and bodies,
Yours also. Truly. Bumping

My head against a stanza, I knocked
My conscience some inches to the left.

Self-deprecating indirection makes this passage difficult to paraphrase. Dinh seems poised to claim that poetry has less to do with pleasure (his own prosody can seem ad hoc; musicality is not its first concern) and more to do with “a glancing clarification.” But even poetry that would clarify “feels false,” he says. About all we can hope for from poetry is that the reader is changed by it, having been “knocked” to “the left”—I take it he means the political left. The hoped-for event in conscience might have little to do with “clarification” per se. As a statement this is a little muddled, to be sure, mushy, as Dinh seems to admit in appealing to “the context of this slammer,” to our prison planet. That is, he seems to admit that the damage done to the culture limits his own poems and thinking. I wonder if Dinh is a moralist at heart: “conscience” is the word here most worthy of thought.

Love Like Hate is set in Saigon, which “lost its identity in 1975” but “by the early nineties it had regained much of it back.” Saigon is “thoroughly post-modern,” “a hodgepodge of incoherence” thriving on “pastiche.” The novel describes the fate of the resourceful Kim Lan’s family in communist-capitalist Vietnam. Kim Lan wants her daughter to marry a Vietnamese American for a better life in the United States, a wish that one early chapter shows to be deluded. We glimpse the impoverished life of one Viet Kieu named “Jaded” in a Philadelphia as depressing and more violent than Vietnam. After that it’s no surprise that Kim Lan’s hopes for her daughter come to nothing. Her daughter, Hoa, falls in love with a rock musician. Kim Lan tries to prevent Hoa’s affair by confining her to the house, only to have her escape over the rooftops in search of her boyfriend, who has already left her for someone else. Kim Lan has a husband, Hoang Long, a South Vietnamese army captain she lost track of in the war. He spends most of the novel in a reeducation camp in the north and then surprises her with a letter. She visits the camp, hiding what she is doing from her new husband. He is eventually released and comes back to Kim Lan’s café, where he finds the new husband. She gives him the money she has on hand so he will go away. He takes the money and heads for the home of his mistress but soon has the money stolen from him.

The plot of *Love Like Hate* is sufficient, and so is its characterization, which includes sharp sketches like that of Sky, an American "gutter punk" teaching English in Vietnam while searching for Buddhism: "He had gone to Vietnam to explore Buddhism, only to discover that there was no Buddhism in Vietnam.... In the Vietnamese universe, Buddhism is merely a thin blanket half hiding an animist demon." The novel's characters are either hopeless onanists beaten into torpor or incompetent opportunists, their futures not at all encouraging, though Kim Lan and her daughter Hoa are survivors. In the daughter's case survival unfortunately likely means a future in upmarket prostitution. But it is commentary that I read Dinh for, not storytelling or characters. I am sometimes bored by his quasi-apocalyptic, Kunstlerian predictions (e. g., "all of humanity is about to reverse gear and roll backward down the oily slope of progress" he writes in the 9/11 chapter of the novel) but I am interested in his remarks about "a parallel between capitalism and Communism" and in his account of the recent history of Vietnam. There is even mockery of the kind one expects in his poems here—for example: "This free verse quatrain…shows that God was very much in tune with the poetics of his time.... When God writes a poem, it appears simultaneously (in his head) in 6,822 languages." My favorite passage is Dinh's description of a mosquito feasting on a "fatty capillary": "the American's blood tasted a bit like vanilla ice cream." Dinh is brilliant at that kind of thing, though this is not a poet's novel. There is story here, and history, and thanks to their presence the novel hits harder than his recent poems.

Keith Tuma

§

Steve Tomasula, Stephen Farrell, Matt Lavoy, and Christian Jara, *TOC*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009. DVD-ROM. $16.95

The aim of Steve Tomasula's most recent narrative experiment, the new media novel *TOC*, seems straightforward: to rework our conventional idea of the novel by use of nonlinear sequencing and participatory choice in the creation of narrative. It has rightly been praised as a magnum opus of software design and creativity, combining text, graphics, and video unpredictably and artfully in an interactive environment. The graphics theme is particularly striking: its affected Victorian aesthetic might be described as "steampunk," with sepia tones and metal clock faces overlaid with fragments of mechanical blueprints, sometimes pulsating with a silent clock tick.

As with most new media, the look and feel of the digital environment prove to be the most innovative aspects of the work. *TOC* relies on seamless transitions between various media, a basic version of what is known