

Wandering Bodies, Wondering Minds **The Mapping of Home in Asian American Poetry**

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The Mapping of Home in Asian American Poetry

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INTRODUCTION

It is said, *there is no place like home*, an age-old adage that holds the promise and offers the possibility of a home that is irreplaceable; a true home that is unlike any other place. But, if there is truly no place like home, what is one to do when displaced from that very place? What does one have to do in order to belong to a place, other than home? And, what would this place need to embody, in order for us to call it home?

It is said, *home is where the heart is*; an age-old adage that holds the promise of a home even when distance separates the body from the very place that holds our hearts captive. But, is it within our capacity to inhabit two places at once, without feeling the consequences of this disembodiment?

Madan Sarup tries to grapple with the meaning of home as he asks himself—and us—a series of questions about the ambiguous location and meaning of home; “Is it wherever your family is, where you have been brought up? ... Is it where your parents are buried? Is home the place from where you have been displaced, or where you are now?” (Sarup 1994, 94).

In an attempt to address questions about home, Moore (2000), draws on a comprehensive list of meanings put forth by the environmental psychologist G. Hayward (1975) and summarises it as thus: “home as physical structure; home as territory; home as locus in space; home as self and self identity, and home as a social and cultural unit” (2002, 210). She further goes on to cite Horwitz and Tognoli who have asserted that home “is a living process or a construction” and people have a “vocabulary for talking about an inner and outer movement toward making a home” (quoted in Moore 2000, 212).

In his book, *Colony, Nation and Globalisation: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature*, Eddie Tay (2010), compels us to look beyond what home might mean to us, and instead think about what it might take to be at home:

Home is a physical space; it is also the location of the self, a symbolic terrain invested with social, political, and cultural meanings. To be at home is to identify an image of the self in prevalent ideological discourses; hence, if one is not at home, one is at odds with prevailing social and political conditions. (1)

Tay argues that home is a concept that has to be understood in relation to the socio-political realities of its location and the location of the individual within that space. This would suggest that in order for an individual to feel at home, his or her identity would have to mirror the “symbolic terrain,” which should lead us to question how a physical place might go on to become a symbolic space and who might participate in creating discourses and policies that facilitate such a transmutation. Moreover, it also leads us to consider the possibility that the word home could also be synonymous to country, homeland, and nation.

John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith in their introduction to the book, *Nationalism*, attempt at unpacking the definition of a nation and how it might be incongruent to other units of collective identities:

While it is recognized that the concept of the nation must be differentiated from the concepts of collective identity like class, region, gender, race, and religious community, there is little agreement about the role of ethnic, as opposed to political component of nation or about the balance between ‘subjective’ elements like will and memory, and more ‘objective’ elements like territory, language or about the role of ethnicity in national identity. (1994, 4)

For Asian Americans, their perceived identity—at the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender—and how that identity sits within the narrative of the American nation and the American dream, is anything, but tenuous. The “subjective” and “objective” elements that have contributed to the creation of the American nation-state have institutionally and emotionally haunted the subjectivities of its very people; especially in the case of Asian Americans. The American nation-state, post-independence, has benefited from the labour of people from the Asia-Pacific, but has also punished them through state-sponsored racial exclusion, as pointed out by Anne Anlin Cheng in her book, *The Melancholy of Race*:

In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act barred entry of labourers for ten years; the exclusion was then extended indefinitely in 1902; then the Immigration Act of 1924 also known as the National Origins Acts, prohibited entry into the United States for permanent residence to all persons whose national origin sprang from within what was labelled as the Asia-Pacific triangle, constituting the first and only act of legalized immigration discrimination based on race in the United States. (2001, 33)

It wasn't until 1965 that the immigration ban was completely lifted. For more than a hundred years, immigrants of Asian origin were systematically and systemically discriminated against, interned in prison camps, and not offered any opportunity for homemaking. This meant that for Asian Americans, the movement from being at a place to becoming one with the place was founded upon exclusion, persecution, suspicion, and rejection.

Of course, we are all beings on the move and we have all experienced displacement in some form or the other, especially in the context of the globalised world we live in. However, it is important to note that not all displacements are the same and thus writings on home and place are informed, and emerge from disparate and dissimilar subject positions and experiences. As Kaplan asserts:

All displacements are not the same. Yet the occidental ethnographer, the modernist expatriate poet, the writer of popular travel accounts, and the tourist may all participate in the mythologized narrativizations of displacement without questioning the cultural, political, and economic grounds of their different professions, privileges, means, and limitations. Immigrants, refugees, exiles, nomads, and the homeless also move in and out of these discourses as metaphors, tropes, and symbols but rarely as historically recognized producers of critical discourses themselves. (2006, 2)

In other words, what Kaplan is urging us to do is pay heed to the different conditions that result in the creation of a displaced individual and how he or she might respond to the notions of place and home.

This research will try to tease out the various meanings of home by exploring how Asian American poets have tried to remember, reconstruct, rebuild, and reclaim both immaterial and material homes for themselves and their communities, by defining or re-defining the immigrant narratives on place and displacement. While the Asian American identity is an umbrella term that encompasses all immigrants of Asian origin and descent, the scope of the research is restrictive of an expansive approach that might include all heterogeneous ethnic identities that emerge from different points of origin. Therefore, it would be critical to note that the featured poets and poems are in no way representative of Asian American diversity. Instead, it is the question of home, as a concept, that drives the focus of this research.

Furthermore, the history of immigration of Asians to the United States dates back to the 18th century, and it is important to pay tribute to the writings that have helped us better understand the experiences of the early Asian migrants to the United States. The Chinese were the first to be lured by the promise of the American dream, but what they encountered in

the new land was far from what they had imagined, as reflected in this poignant excerpt from an official record kept by the Sam Yup Benevolent Association, dated 1876:

San Francisco is more than 20,000 miles from China. When the Americans opened up the frontier lands, they purposely used homesteading and gold mining to attract immigrants. That was why the Chinese flocked to California like ducks to water. Yet who knows how many of them died with their ambitions unattained, their dreams unfulfilled. Instead, their spirits could not return to their homeland since their bones were buried in foreign soil. They could only gaze longingly toward home, and their anguish deepened with each passing of Ching Ming. (quoted in Yung et al. 2012, 27)

Away from hearth and home, the Chinese in San Francisco and Hawaii toiled in the mines and railroad tracks, while their gaze was fixed “longingly” towards their homeland, across the Pacific. Sam Yup Benevolent Association was one of the many associations that would help those who perished in the inhospitable terrains of America reunite with their homelands by sending back their remains. Perhaps, they always believed that after earning enough money, they would be able to leave the “foreign soil” in order to return to their native place, but that wasn’t the case for many. What is amply clear is that their new place of residence, their supposed home away from home, was anything but welcoming, as noted by the editors of the book *Chinese Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present*:

The reception the Chinese received in the United States was hostile almost from the start. Arriving at a time when European Americans, imbued with a strong sense of manifest destiny and white supremacy, were expanding into the American West, laying claim to its lands and riches, Chinese immigrants fell victim to racial discrimination and class exploitation...China, in their view, was a backward, heathen, and degenerate country, and its people, especially its poor, part of the dregs of humanity. They were not seen as the stuff from which “real” Americans were made.

Moreover, the racial difference of the Chinese set them apart, with white Americans considering them as a separate people, akin to other subordinates such as Africans, Mexicans, and American Indians. (Yung et al. 2012, 2)

The distance from their familial home and country, and the compounding hostility the Chinese faced in America was a common experience shared by other immigrants of Asian descent who followed suit. As Lisa Lowe writes in *Immigrant Acts*, “Asian labourers immigrating to United States from the nineteenth century onward were seen as a “yellow peril” threatening to displace white European immigrants” (2007, 4). She goes on to assert that the alienation and persecution of Asian immigrants was founded on an “exclusionist rhetoric” that “ranged from nativist agitation, which claimed that ‘servile coolie’ Chinese labour undercut ‘free white labour’, to declarations about the racial unassimilability of the Japanese, to arguments that Asian social organization threatened the integrity of American political institutions” (2007, 5). In other words, Asian immigrants found themselves in a place—far away from home—that did not make it easy for them to plant their roots, or make America their new home, producing a sense of acute displacement and alienation.

As Sau Ling Cynthia Wong notes, the first record of poetry written by Asian immigrants in the U.S. consisted of “poems carved by detained immigrants into the wooden walls of barracks on Angel Island (in San Francisco bay), which was used as an immigration station between 1910 and 1940 in which to interrogate entrants and screen out ‘paper sons’ with forged documents” (1997, 42). Moreover, as noted by Cheng, while the United States opened its borders to attract labour from across the Pacific, it soon turned on Chinese immigrants, and subsequently other immigrants of Asian origin:

In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act barred entry of labourers for ten years; the exclusion was then extended indefinitely in 1902; then the Immigration Act of 1924 also known as the National Origins Acts, prohibited entry into the United States for

permanent residence to all persons whose national origin sprang from within what was labelled as the Asia-Pacific triangle, constituting the first and only act of legalized immigration discrimination based on race in the United States. This 1924 law stayed in place until World War II, when, out of embarrassment because of the United State's alliance with China and then the Philippines against Japan, the government repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. Not until 1952 did the McCurren-Walter Act abolish the restrictions on the Asia-Pacific Triangle and race-based exclusions from naturalizations. (2001, 33)

The response to systematic and systemic discrimination against Asian immigrants is not a recent phenomenon, as made evident by the poems scrawled on the walls of the detention centre in Angel Island. Despite the mythmaking around America as the country built by immigrants, and a land that was meant to welcome all, the poems scrawled on Angel Island “constitute a powerful counter discourse to the myth of America as a nation open to all immigrants” (Wong 1997, 42-43). However, considering the scope of this thesis, it would be impossible to do justice to the corpus of poetry written by Americans of Asian origin, from the 18th century to date. Therefore, the research will only focus on Asian American poetry from the 1960s and onwards, since that is the period that is associated with the creation of the “Asian American” identity as noted by Wong:

It was only with the pan-Asian movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which highlighted the importance of recognizing Asians in America as an internally colonized ethnic minority, that the term ‘Chinese American’ like its superordiante ‘Asian Americans,’ began to take on its current meaning, connoting at once a claim to full membership in American society and intragroup coalition based on similarities in historical circumstances” (1997, 40).

The coining of the double-barrelled identity and the embracing of it allows us to view how poets have navigated through their affiliations with multiple places, spaces, and identities, and how they have negotiated the demands made on their ethnic identity and their national identity. Since the 1960s also marks the beginning of a much more vocal and politicised Asian American voice, it allows us to see how their poetry changes or challenges the American notion of nation and who is part of that national imaginary.

The first chapter of this M.A. thesis will examine how poets have approached the concept of home and place, by looking in the direction of their pasts or rather, the home left behind. By exploring poems that place the site of home in memory, the chapter will try to understand how poets have responded to the loss of their native land. By analysing the poetics of exile, it will try to reflect on poets who are caught between the sites of their past and their present and whether the two can coexist. By drawing on theoretical insights on mourning, memory, and exile, the chapter will focus on poems by Agha Shahid Ali, Zhang Zhen, Tsering W. Dhompa, Ha Jin, and Shirley Lim.

The second chapter will expand the notion of home to include the dynamic of the American nation-state. An immigrant's journey begins from his or her point of departure, which is subsequently followed by his or her presence in her adoptive land. The child of an Asian immigrant, however, is torn between the native land of his or her parents, and America, the only land he or she knows or has lived in. Therefore, the second chapter will also look at the external markers of identity juxtaposed against the subjective self. It will draw on critical perspectives on the exclusions and inclusions manufactured by a homogenous culture, in parallel to notions of hybridity and fragmented subjectivities. By exploring poems by Diana Chang, Janice Mirikitani, Marilyn Chin, Mitsuye Yamada, Merle Woo, Amita Vasudeva, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Fatima Asghar and Eve L. Ewing, the chapter will discuss how poets negotiate their positions within the matrix of ethnicity, culture, race, and nationalism.

The last chapter will explore whether a home can be created or reclaimed in, and through language. By looking at the relationship of poets with the English language, we will see whether language might be the ultimate refuge or home for the Asian American writer, through the act of breaching the homogenising politics of the dominant discourse. The chapter will approach language as a critical element towards identity formation, and subsequently a subjective element that can create a state of inclusion or exclusion. It will draw on critical insights from the field of sociolinguistics and scholarship on the place of minority groups and their languages within the national project of the United States. By looking at the different textual practices used by poets like Li Young Lee, Cathy Park Hong, Franny Choi, and Lawson Fusao Inada, the chapter will explore whether language can be a strategic tool for resistance and reclamation.

The aforementioned approaches to the concept of home should help us understand how the immigrant narrative on place might change as we pay attention to the different forces that cause displacement. We should also be able to assess whether the featured poets succeed at finding a home in their memory, their nation, or language. By looking at how poets have approached the concept of home in different sites, we might be able to discover whether the poems offer strategies that might help us to move from a state of displacement towards finding a place called home.

II

Home in Memory: Remember, Recreate, and Recuperate

If home is found on both sides of the globe,
home is of course here—and always a missed land.

Agha Shahid Ali

“Land” (2009)

Edward Said described the state of exile as the “unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,” producing an “essential sadness that can never be surmounted” (2000, 173). If, as Said suggests, the “native place” is the self’s true home, would being separated from it not change the very making of the self? If the sadness that Said refers to is truly insurmountable, does that mean that the self who has suffered the loss of his or her true home has no hope for overcoming the grief? Are those in exile, then, incurably condemned to mourn the loss of their native land, their point of origin, to the extent that they are unable to commit themselves to the promise of a new home in a new land?

While one might argue that a subject is only in exile if he or she has been forced out of her country as suggested by Said, the sense of exile, and the sentiment of loss caused by separation from one’s loved home, is perhaps shared by all displaced people to varying

degrees. Home, after all, is not just the physical shelter, but perhaps a metonym for family, homeland, community, kin, and ultimately one's identity, and thus a separation from home doesn't just mean an inconsolable loss, but it might also mean the loss of one's self.

Freud in his essay, "Mourning and Melancholia" put forth two ways in which individuals deal with loss. He saw "mourning" as a natural and even necessary response to the loss of a loved object. On the other hand, he viewed "melancholia," as being close to a permanent affliction. According to Freud, in mourning, "the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholy it is the ego itself" (1955, 240-242).

As summarised by Cheng, mourning "is finite in character and accepts substitution (that is, the lost object can be relinquished and eventually replaced)" (2001, 8). In other words, mourning is desirable in order to allow the individual to eventually let go of the lost object and allow him or her to form a new bond with a replacement. If we were to view the loss of home in the same vein, with the passage of time, and having mourned the separation from the homeland, an individual might be able to feel at home again in a new place, while still looking back to the object of his or her loss, with nostalgia.

Take for instance, the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali, who at the age of twelve, moved with his family to the United States so his father could pursue his PhD. Upon completion, the family moved back to Srinagar, but Ali would soon return to the U.S. to pursue his graduate studies and remain there for the rest of his life, though he did spend most of his summers in Kashmir with his parents. The writer, Amitava Ghosh, a close friend of Ali's, reflected on the poet's seamless relationship with the two places he called his home; "The idea of a cultural divide or conflict had no purchase in his mind: America and India were the two poles of his life, and he was at home in both in a way that was utterly easeful and unproblematic" (Ghosh 2002). Mark Doty, in his review of Ali's collection of poems, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems*, affirms Ghosh's observation, "Ali so thoroughly inhabits

his exile, in this haunting life's work, and that he makes of it—both for his own spirit and for his readers—a dwelling place” (2009). Doty suggests that Ali, in his poems, has managed to create space between his lines that are a refuge for both him and his readers. Ali's poetics, then, offer the promise of homemaking, even after leaving home, while being able to look back to his native land with nostalgia as reflected in his poem “Postcard from Kashmir” in which Kashmir turns into a treasured keepsake:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
my home a neat four by six inches.
I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half inch Himalayas in my hand.
This is home. And this is the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colours won't be so brilliant,
The Jhelum's waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.
And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still underdeveloped. (Ali 2009, 29)

Ali pockets his homeland captured in the postcard and carries it around, knowing well enough that what exists in his memory and what awaits him in reality are forever incommensurable. Referring to the postcard, the poet admits, “This is home. And this is the closest / I'll ever be to home.” Upon his return, his material home might not compare to the home he has captured and recreated in his memory; his “overexposed” love like an ardent

overcompensation for his absence. The ideal and the idyllic home for Ali only exists in memory, and it is the memory of it that Ali privileges. According to Friedman, “Memory is the first rewriting of home, an act of re-presentation of what was as the precondition for writing home in the medium of text—the page, the book as the corpus of memory”(2004, 206). The recreation and representation of home in the “neat four by six inches” will be the closest he will be to the materiality of his native land; after all, the postcard is safe from any mutations or corruptions, leading the poet to privilege a copy of the real thing, as opposed to the real thing.

While Ali’s poem might be seeped in nostalgia, the fact that the home he recreates in his mind might not be the same as the home left behind also suggests a negation of what has been lost as a result of distance and passage of time. On the other hand, Rushdie is much more vocal about the consequence of displacement and how it might affect the writer in exile:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands...It may be that when the Indian writer who comes from outside India tries to reflect the world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost. (1992, 10)

In other words, Rushdie believes that displacement—irrespective of the conditions that cause it—produces a sense of loss which compels writers to look to their past, to their memories, in order to recreate the object of loss, even though, the recreation might never be an exact replica.

Similarly, Zhang Zhen, a Chinese American poet, who moved to the United States in the 1990s was not forced to leave her homeland, but that does not make her desire for the home left behind, and the acknowledgement of loss any less poignant, especially when she compares the “nature” of the place she inhabits at the moment of writing, to its incommensurability with the land of her birth, her past, as reflected in an excerpt from her poem “Deep into Småland”:

The nature of this place
is a bad fit with my past,
yet sometimes I glimpse
my life’s other half.
Sometimes I can think back far:
the aged thorn trees and stone steps
force me to consider:
should I be buried in this foreign land
or drift back like white rain
and drop in to the lake of my hometown?

as if that place would ever let me return. (Zhen 1999, 101-102)

When the poet uses the descriptor, “this place,” she immediately creates a distance, or rather, a “that place,” and alludes to a somewhat ambivalent relationship to her native land, but she cannot help, but look back. Her past makes up the other “half” of her life. The splitting of the self into two halves, whereby the one half is forever looking to the past, suggests a state of rootlessness. Zhen’s fragmented identity does not allow her to be physically and mentally present and make her presence fully felt in both places. Contemplating her death in two parallel places, she attributes a materiality to her “burial” in the “foreign land” and juxtaposes

it to the fleeting and dissipating image of “white rain”. Moreover, Zhen’s allusion to the final resting place is of cultural and historical significance. In their book, *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present*—a wonderful and poignant anthology of letters, songs, memoirs, and poems by Chinese American immigrants—the editors inform us of burial rituals and beliefs in Chinese culture and the struggle to maintain it in the inhospitable and unwelcome terrains of America, when the Chinese migrants first arrived:

Traditional Chinese belief held that the souls of the dead could not rest until they were interred in the soil of their native village...Death away from the home village, therefore, posed a difficult problem for Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century...One of the first things that a new arrival to Gold Mountain would do was arrange for his body to be shipped to China for burial should he meet with an unfortunate accident... One of the reasons many Chinese in America tenaciously retained their connections to China and Chinese traditions had to do with their deep estrangement from American life and society. Unaccepted here, many Chinese immigrants persisted in their view that “fallen leaves return to their roots.

(Yung et al. 2012, 26)

For Zhen, being entombed in the foreign land might mean a spiritual loss, whereby her soul might turn into a ghostly apparition that will never find release, evoking a sense of haunting, much similar to Rushdie’s view. But, the alternative is an act of self-negation as she sees herself as drops of water dropping into a giant lake signifying a disappearance of her body into the multitude. The desire to “drift back” also suggests a lack of wilful agency, whereby the poet is unable to attain unity, unable to fix her roots to one single place or territory. Her existence, like her state of being is torn between her past and her present, which is still decidedly a “foreign land”. However, the last line of her poem suggests that even if she might want to return to her native land, it might not let her return. This might allude to either the

poet's tenuous relationship with her land, which makes her critical of its construct, or it might allude to the poet's psyche that is ridden with guilt for being away for too long. The guilt of abandoning her native place compounded with the fear of being abandoned makes the poet's exilic condition precarious. While Ali's seemingly "unproblematic" existence in both lands comes across as hopeful, one might wonder whether his fluidity might be threatened if the poet did not have the opportunity to leave and return to his homeland/s at will. What happens when one cannot return to the home one has left behind?

A poet who has been forced to leave his or her own homeland might not be able to write about home in the same vein as Ali. While Ali's poem still reckons with the distance between his adoptive home and his native land, it turns loss into a chimera-like image; elusive, yes, but still beautiful. Could this beauty rest in a homeland that rejects and expels its own kind?

In their introduction to the book, *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, the editors point out the need to look beyond the transnational identity promised by the diasporic experience as shared to a certain degree by Ali and Zhen:

Within postcolonial studies and critical cultural theory, the concept of 'diaspora' has developed as an emblem of multi-locality, 'post-nationality' and non-linearity of both movement and time. Thus diaspora questions the language of integration, assimilation or inclusion assumed within national frames, which takes for granted a linear narrative of migration as disconnected from colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial relations of power. The notion of diaspora opens up 'a historical and experiential rift between the locations of residence and the locations of belonging, and compels us to rethink the problematic of 'home' and 'homeland', and migrants' relations to them.

(Ahmed et al. 2003, 7-8)

This suggests that, a diasporic writer might have the privilege to move between multiple

localities, physically and mentally, allowing for his or her poetics to take a nostalgic turn. However, this might not be the case for an individual who has had to move to America as a refugee or a political exile. The repression or the violence that forces one to leave their home continues to haunt the exilic subject, but since violent social upheavals often lead to the uprooting of entire families and communities, the loss of home is felt even by those who might not remember what home was like in the first place - the children.

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, a Tibetan-American poet, reckons with the idea of home as a possession and as a transitory movement that oscillates between her indirect relationship to Tibet, the place that she fled with her mother after the Chinese occupation, like thousands of other Tibetans. Dhompa visited Tibet for the first time after her mother's death in India. Her mother's death also marked her departure from India as she moved to America and decided to settle there. In her book, she writes of her untenable identity in relation to the different places she has had to call home:

I have lived my life defined as a refugee in Nepal and India, a resident alien and immigrant in the United States. At last, I am a Tibetan in Tibet, a Khampa in Kham—albeit as a tourist in my occupied and tethered country. (2003, 94)

What is interesting in this excerpt is that Dhompa defines her identity through external markers that have defined her identity in relation to place: “refugee,” “alien,” “immigrant,” “Khampa,” and “tourist”. Even upon her return to her native land, she might want to believe that she has finally become one with Kham, her lost land, and subsequently reclaim her name derived from that land, Khampa. Instead she refers to herself as a tourist. In a review of her book, *A Home in Tibet*, Dixit notes how Dhompa's mother, despite the distance from Tibet, tried to cultivate a bond between her daughter and the memory of Tibet; “Tsering Wangmo's mother kept assuring her daughter that they would return to Tibet some day, and that their nomadic life in exile was temporary...It is almost as if Tashi Dolkar [Dhompa's mother

somehow knew she would never go back, and wanted to instil in her daughter a deep love for a phayul she had never seen” (Dixit 2013). However, the idyllic phayul—fatherland in Tibetan—that her mother told her about is reduced to an occupied territory. In this excerpt from the poem “Home, a Transitive,” Dhampo reflects on the triadic relationship between her mother, herself, and home. She views her mother as someone who will never be able to come to terms with her deracination. But she also tries to give voice to her mother’s loss and the trauma related to that loss:

Mother died a refugee, she thought the status
was a promise of return. She had a version
of nation under the bed. Never mind that her village
took a new name; the jar of water
from her childhood’s river, ten stones and five
twigs were clues that home was transitive. (Dhampo 2017)

For the poet’s mother, a “version of nation” is kept under her bed, but the nation is imaginary, a vestigial remnant that exists in her memory, and something that she hides under the bed. The “nation” she lost and that is now under her bed, is only a representation of the lost object. Anne Anlin Cheng in her book *The Melancholy of Race* suggests that, “if an identity is founded on prohibition, denial, marginalization, or loss, then the simple act of naming cannot recuperate that loss, except a representation of recuperation” (2001, 85-86). The poet’s mother will never be able to attain a state of permanence, as for her, her home, and her nation exists in the memory of her past. And memory is never fixed or stable which subsequently makes her idea of home permanently transitive: an object that can only exist in relation to other; or an object that is always in transition. In contrast to Rushdie’s take on the imaginary homeland mentioned earlier, Dhampa’s refugee status makes her relationship to her homeland untenable as reflected in this excerpt from her book:

An imagined country has a tenacious grip, perhaps more so than a known one, for there are no disappointments or memories to contradict the ideal. The imagined country is an ideal, and within it, a perspective of motherland gathers meaning. In this lies the irony of a refugee's state of mind, seeking to establish roots in a place that bears very little resemblance to what it becomes over time. (2013, 218)

As mentioned earlier, one's relationship with home is also contingent to one's ability or inability to return to the place that was once called home. The poet that seeks refuge in a new place that must become his or her new home has to come to the terms with the fact that his or her point of arrival also marks the point of no return. The poet in exile has an ambivalent relationship to his or her homeland or home, especially if he or she has been forced to leave due to political oppression. Ha Jin, the Chinese American poet has spoken about the difference in the meaning of home and country in Western Classics and Chinese culture in an interview with *The New York Times*:

In ancient Western classics, the word "country" refers to one's homestead and one's village. In Chinese, the word "country" has the word "home" within it. So it's pathological to only love one's country without loving one's home. Furthermore, if a country cannot protect your home, that country does not deserve your love. (Jin 2015)

Ha Jin's ambivalent relationship to his home and country, and how its brutality continues to haunt his present circumstance is made evident in this excerpt from his poem, "I Sing of an Old Land":

I speak of the old land not
out of love or wonderment.
Like my ancestors who were scattered into the smoky winds,
who scrambled to leave home
or rushed towards the approaching enemies,

I join those who fled and returned,
who disappeared in other lands
bearing no hope but persistence, no honor but the story,
no fortune but parents and children,
singing a timeless curse,
a curse that has bound us together
and rooted us deep in the wreck
of our homeland. (1996a, 19-20)

The “curse” that the poet refers to is the cause and the consequence of rejection and expulsion. The collective experience of the forced exit or the departure galvanizes a bond that is founded upon pain and grief. The poet connects his self to the exilic collective when he announces, “I join those who fled and returned,” and alludes to their lives being subsumed by the dominant cultures of foreign lands. In absence of networks of kinship and roots that offer anchorage and meaning to their beings, these individuals “disappear” outside of their homelands. Their deeds in the foreign lands are reduced to the sole purpose of survival lacking narratives of “honour,” but their stories of exits, arrivals, and survival persist and are passed down. The rootedness that the poet refers to, is in itself a contradiction as he places a positive descriptor for home and belonging outside and against the imagery of the wrecked homeland.

Similarly, in his poem “Past,” Ha Jin juxtaposes his relationship with his past with that of other individuals he observes; “I saw someone set up his past as a harbour./ Wherever it sails, his boat is safe— / if a storm comes, he can always head for home. / His voyage is the adventure of a kite.” (1996b, 63). By using a sailboat as a metaphor for someone else’s past, Ha Jin compels us to reflect on how a subject’s socio-historic position can contribute to creating completely different relationships with the past. For a more privileged subject who

has not experienced displacement or deracination, his or her past can be easily be put to rest or anchored at the “harbour,” whereas Ha Jin’s past, unlike the “sailboat”, is not afforded a safe passage to what may be the repository, or “home” of memories. The contrast between a safe voyage and a voyage for safety is made evident here. The image of a kite alludes to a carefree wandering that is propelled by the direction of the wind. The flight of a kite is aimless whereas the flight of a refugee or a political exile is aimed at survival.

It is evident that remembering a home left behind can produce a sense of nostalgia, as seen in poems by Ali and Zhen, but it can also point towards a more ambivalent relationship that is torn between love and hate, expectation and disappointment, and the imagined experience against the lived experience, complicating the process of mourning. Despite being in one place, they are torn between two places and found oscillating between different histories, different cultures, different places, and different demands on their identity.

Said described exile as existing “in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half detachments, nostalgic and sentimental” (2000, 175). In other words, a displaced subject, whether from his or her native land, or from the land he or she believes she belongs to is condemned to live a partial life, forever stuck in between. Is the Asian American identity, then, representative of that in-between space? Even if a poet overcomes the loss of his or her native land, he or she still has to build a home in a new place. But, what if the new place does not take you in as one of its own?

The poet Shirley Lim—a Chinese Malay poet—has named her departure from her homeland a voluntary exile; “In claiming exile, the individual is crying foul against a state; is asserting a condition of inequality and injustice at the hand of an oppressing force” (quoted in Tay 2005, 294). Exiled from her homeland, Lim had to embark on the project of homemaking in another country, a country that had also systemically and systematically discriminated

against Americans of Asian descent. In other words, Lim left one hostile homeland to find herself in another hostile home. Estranged from both places, her poetics try to make sense of her place in the world and her identity in relation to place itself. In her poem “Father in China,” Lim declares, “...I am unhoused / in yet another country” (2011a, 309-310). Her “unhousing” in Malaysia was at the hand of the nation-state and her “unhousing” in America is a manifestation of the lingering guilt, the memories of past, and the lack of intimacy with her current home.

In her poem, “The Mourning Months” (2011b, 339-340), Lim draws on the romanticism of Wordsworth and his daffodils in full bloom. For Wordsworth, in his poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” daffodils are a source of pleasure during his state of “pensive” solitude (Wordsworth, 2017). However, for Lim the images of the “Past day lilies that look somewhat // like Wordsworth daffodils, yellow as / Morning sunshine, bred and potted / In fenced yards”, seem to be mere observations. The barricading of the Wordsworth’s wild daffodils creates an unsettling image of entrapment. And unlike Wordsworth, Lim does not get any pleasure out of the “vibrant peach buds” that remind her of her stepmother who wasn’t much older than her—“Today the vibrant peach buds poke / Open, vulgar as those Stepmother embroidered / In the years after father brought her home.” Lim takes note of the months of Spring, but for her the season of life and colour is just for the eye and not for the soul. Instead, she roots her affliction in these months of “mourning” as the title suggests. The act of mourning takes on an almost somatic effect as the last four lines of her poem connect her disconnect from nature to her exilic status;

Allergic in a new country, I am running

Against months, choking on the everyday

Pollen of nature, not daring, carrying

The years’ of exiled austerities. (2011b, 339-340)

As Cheng suggests, “We can think of the Freudian melancholic as someone hypochondriacally aware of and allergic to the abjection lodged within” (2001, 65). Are the allergens that Lim refers to limited to just the “pollen” or could the new and strange country be a possible stand-in? She cannot overcome her habitual reaction to the assault of the voluminous nature and she juxtaposes it with the lack of “exiled austerities”. The austerities for the poet are both material and spiritual. Despite the presence of growth and life in the form of spring blossoms, the poet’s allusion to a lack of agency suggests that she dare not step out of her median state. She is just the bearer of her displacement, carrying the places of her past like a debilitating burden that weighs heavy.

However, in the case of both Lim and Dhompa, there is a desire for a movement towards future, or the desire to break away from their preoccupation with their pasts and their past homelands. The second part of “Home, a Transitive” reads as such:

...Belonging: a verb and
a strip of hope I fed with orchids on sale and recipes
brought from a country I now hover over in virtual maps.
I am walking backwards hoping to reverse,
to unsee what I cannot forget. To leave something else
as trails to find a way forward. (Dhompa 2017)

The poet looks to the future and the promise of “belonging” it may offer or contain, but she admittedly will forever have to reckon with the loss of her home. As she straddles between the “consequence of loss,” and the “vocabulary of departure,” the desire for moving forward is imminent. Gampo’s attempt to “unsee” is a wilful movement towards eviscerating her loss, but even if she turns a blind eye, will the spectre of her past release her from its grip?

Similarly, Lim suggests a hopeful surrender to her adoptive home, America, in this excerpt from her poem, “Learning to Love America”:

because it has no pure products
because the Pacific Ocean sweeps along the coastline
because the water of the ocean is cold
and because land is better than ocean
because I say we rather than they
.....
because I have nursed my son at my breast
because he is a strong American boy
because I have seen his eyes redden when he is asked who he is
because he answers I don't know
because to have a son is to have a country
because my son will bury me here
because countries are in our blood and we bleed them
because it is late and too late to change my mind
because it is time. (2011c, 324)

As the poet lists the reasons as to why she is learning to love America, it is clear that she wrests her future and the future of her child, in her efforts to ground herself to one place. But at the same time, the poet alludes to her uncertainty towards this new mantra of belonging. The abstraction in the line “to have a son is to have a country,” suggests that while she might try and see America as her final resting place, and she has constructed an abstract country in the face of her son, or in the future of her son and how he might carry on her legacy. But at the same time, she cannot shy away from the fact that her son, because of his ethnicity and race, will more than likely be affronted by the question that Lim, and many others from the Asian American community have been repeatedly affronted with – “Where are you from?”

II

The Home In-Between: Negotiating with the Nation

I shuttle passportless within myself,
My eyes slant around both hemispheres.

Diana Chang
“Second Nature” (1983, 20)

“In this country, American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.”

Toni Morrison
(quoted in Izadi 2019)

Lim’s poem “Learning to Love America” is indicative of a reconciliation whereby the poet moves from her exilic status towards trying to form an intimate bond with the adoptive home that holds the promise to replace her lost home. However, when she reflects on her son’s identity in America, one can sense a certain angst; “because he is a strong American boy / because I have seen his eyes redden when he is asked who he is”. The angst lies in the incongruity between how she sees her son, and how America might see him. As we move from the internal relation between the self and home to the exterior, we are compelled to evaluate the place of an individual of Asian origin within the national imagination of America as a nation. An important part of homemaking, after all, is the nation-state, and a stake in that territory as a citizen.

In his essay, “Frontline/Borderposts,” Bhabha asks, “As the migrant and the refugee become the ‘unhomely’ inhabitants of the contemporary world, how do we rethink collective,

communal concepts like homeland, the people, cultural exile?" (1994, 271). Furthermore, how do we think of an Asian American's place in the nation-state of America in relation to that of white Americans; the majority group?

Lisa Lowe, in her book *Immigration Acts* bases her interrogation on extending the country to encompass both the nation and the state as the space where the citizenship is offered as well as contested:

Citizens inhabit the political space of the nation, a space that is, at once, juridically legislated, territorially situated, and culturally embodied, although the law is perhaps the discourse that most literally governs citizenship, U.S. national culture—the collectively forged images, histories, and narratives that place, displace, and replace individuals in relation to the national polity—powerfully shapes who the citizenry is, where they dwell, what they remember, and what they forget. (2007, 2)

In other words, the act of “remembering and forgetting” fits in with the efforts of homemaking for Asian Americans in America, but this effort can be easily sabotaged if the authenticity of their American selves is questioned or challenged by those who do not see them as Americans. In her poem, “Saying Yes” the Chinese American poet Diana Chang writes about her desire to embody both her identities wholeheartedly:

"Are you Chinese?"

"Yes." "American?"

"Yes." "Really Chinese?"

"No . . . not quite."

"Really American?"

"Well, actually, you see ... "

But I would rather say yes

Not neither — nor,

not maybe, but both,
and, not only
The homes I've had,
the ways I am I'd rather say it
twice,
yes (quoted in Ling 1980, 70-71)

While Chang might want to say “yes” to both her identities, the use of the hesitant and wishful “I’d rather say” suggests an obstruction to the desire for inhabiting all the “homes” she has had, and subsequently the identities she feels at home in but cannot project with certainty. Amy Ling attributes the coining of the term “hyphenated condition” to Chang; drawing from the hyphen in the “Asian-American”. According to Ling, “Americans in the ‘hyphenated condition,’ a term Diana Chang coined in a talk at the 1976 MLA convention — and particularly non-Caucasian Americans who are most readily because most visibly distinguishable — live constantly trying to balance on an edge, now slipping over to one side of the hyphen, now climbing back only to fall down the other side” (1980, 69). Ling’s understanding of the condition suggests that for a hyphenated subject, mastering both sides of the hyphen is a tiring and often futile task of trials and errors.

In an excerpt from her poem, “How I Got That Name: An Essay on Assimilation,” Marilyn Chin, the Chinese American poet reflects on the instability of her identity formation as she is torn between a move towards assimilation and how it affects her being:

I am Marilyn Mei Ling Chin.
Oh, how I love the resoluteness
of that first person singular
followed by that stalwart indicative
of “be,” without the certain i-n-g

of “becoming.” Of course,
the name had been changed
somewhere between Angel Island and the sea,
when my father the person
in late 1950s
obsessed with a bombshell blonde
transliterated “Mei Ling” to “Marilyn.” (1994, 16-18)

Chin’s poem is filled with the contradictions of a hybrid identity, but she also infuses in her poem the atrocities acted upon her people by the United States by referring to Angel Island. Her father “transliterating” Mei Ling to Marilyn is not only indicative of the pressures of assimilation, but also the process of assimilating. The desire for the “blonde bombshell Marilyn,” the American symbol of sensual beauty, manifests itself through the act of the misspoken word. The transliteration could be a fault of speech or the subversive desire and subsequent failure to be closer to the American ideal. While the poet expresses triumph in the “resoluteness” of the “am,” in contrast to the continuous making of the identity in the “becoming,” the second verse acts as a whiplash. It presents to us the impossibility of “Marilyn Mei Ling Ching’s,” existence as a whole individual. The past of her family, her community, and her nation has deemed her identity as unsteady, fragmented, and continuously changing.

Julia Salmerón Cabañas, in reference to Chin’s perceived identity and her location as an Asian American subject, points out the evident pressures related to “becoming” an American citizen as opposed to the partial or hyphenated subject; “Para convertirse en ciudadana americana, Chin se tiene que asimilar; en una palabra, cambiar, y la asimilación puede ser mortal [In order to convert herself into an American citizen, Chin has to assimilate; in another word, change, and the process of assimilation can be deadly]”, however, the

author points to Chin's poetic oeuvre as resisting assimilation as the poet draws on multiple histories, multiple traditions to inform and innovate her creative output. (2007, 160).

Homi K. Bhabha sees the hyphen or the "in-between" space as being the site for transforming and "elaborating strategies of selfhood":

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond the narratives of ordinary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha 2010, 1-2).

In other words, the very articulation of difference, especially in opposition to an external suppressive force, can be the subversive act needed to rupture the certitude and strength of the homogenous understanding of identity, while continuing with the project of deconstructing and constructing identities. By taking away the idea that identity is not fixed or static, one also challenges the force that tries to label or mark identity based on race, colour, or ethnicity. Bhabha goes on to say, "The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspectives of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization" (2010, 162). If the dominant American project of essentialization is based on exclusion or suppression of difference, one of the ways of resisting it is to make that difference visible. David Mura writes about his identities that he owns and simultaneously disowns, allowing for a more fluid identity that keeps shifting and changing, and most importantly resists essentialism:

In our postmodern, multicultural, global world, our identities are multiple, are conditioned by our historical circumstances, are something we have been given and something we choose, are always changing, are subject to political and cultural forces

beyond our control, are a continuous creation. As a Japanese-American, as an Asian American, as a person of color, as an American, as a member of the middle class, as a heterosexual, as a male—all these define me and, at the same time, do not limit me, do not define me. (quoted in Xiaojing 2006, 147)

However, while the postmodernist hybrid identity might be a site for creative transformation, resistance, and transgression, some scholars doubt whether it is sufficient to resist the racialisation of Asian Americans as a collective group, especially when the group has to politicise its efforts to resist marginalization and discrimination. For example, the literary critic Sau Ling Cynthia Wong writes, “Theoretically, I could ascribe a great deal of power to interstitiality and subjectivity-shuttling . . . ; in practical political terms, however, I can’t see how an interstitial, shuttling exercise of power is done” (1995, 19). Wong’s concerns are valid. Is it possible for Asian Americans to devise strategies of selfhood while trying to belong or claim America as a home for the collective group? Some might not have the vocabulary, the voice, or the space to assert their selfhood, which would mean that their interests and concerns would have to be represented by another, stronger or more visible voice. Ocean Vuong, the Vietnamese American poet who arrived to America as a refugee fleeing the Vietnam war writes in his debut novel, “In Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous”; “To be or not to be. That is the question. A question, yes, but not a choice” (2019, 63).

Cheng argues that the racial identity of Asian Americans is the very source of racial grief and racial melancholia. She refers “Asian Americanness” as a “melancholic national identity” (2001, 36). She goes further:

Within the national imagination, Asian Americans in particular suffer a ‘phantom illness’ because they occupy an unstable position in the ethnic-racial spectrum, their projected place in America is ghostly...Because of their immigrant and diasporic

histories, Asian Americans are at once physically distanced from yet inextricably assigned to their cultural 'roots'. (69)

The assignation that Cheng refers to can take an insidious form, whereby external forces mark the body of the racial subject and impose an identity on him or her, allowing no opportunity for the subject to have a say. Janice Mirikitani, the Japanese American poet reflects on a homelessness that is forced upon her because of her race. The hatred and suspicion towards Japanese Americans during the second world war led to the most harrowing form of state-sponsored incarceration whereby thousands of Japanese families were held in internment camps and the entire community was seen as the enemy within; the untrustworthy and disloyal alien. Mirikitani responded to the internment of her people with lines that are poignant and pointed:

I do not know the face of this country
it is inhabited by strangers
who call me obscene names.
Jap. Go home.

Where is home? (quoted in Bow 2001, 12)

While Mirikitani uses the first person "I," to position herself as an outsider in her own country, by using the slur "Jap," she speaks on behalf of all Japanese Americans. The co-existence of the first person singular alongside the derogatory collective sign, "Jap," has two effects on the reader. By inserting the very word that was used indiscriminately against her people, the poet is forcing the dominant group—white Americans—to engage with their own historical burden of oppression and discrimination against Japanese Americans. At the same time the poet is using the "I," which is so often associated with the confessional, as a way to represent a "we". While the collective and the individual are not always commensurable, it is sometimes critical to represent historical wrongs, build solidarity, and form a resistance that

is fuelled by a personal voice that resonates with a collective experience; especially when that experience is marred with oppression and marginalization. Take for instance, this stanza from the poem “Yellow Woman Speaks,” by Merle Woo:

And I will expose the lies and ridicule
the impotence of those who have called us
chink
yellow-livered
slanted cunts
exotic
in order to abuse and exploit us.

And I will destroy them. (quoted in Zhang 2008, 103)

By inserting the Sinophobic slurs that have been historically used against Chinese Americans, the poet insists on confronting America’s dominant national psyche and compelling it to face the rage that erupts in text; the text works both as a record and a demand for reparation. As Zhou suggests:

The elocutionary subject position of the “I” enables the repressed other to rearticulate its otherness by revealing an undefinable interiority and an unsettling alterity exterior to the dominant systems of thought and values. For the socially constructed abject other to assert an interiority that resists social inscriptions is to undermine both the normative categories and those which are perceived as deviant from the norm.

(2006,4)

In reference to Yamada’s poetry collection, *Prison Camp Notes*, Patterson explains the workings of the presidential order that led to the shameful internment of Japanese Americans living in America :

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, a document

that effectively granted General John L. DeWitt full authority to exclude persons of Japanese ancestry-both American citizens and resident aliens-from the West Coast. The Order indicated that this evacuation of the Japanese, and their placement first in "assembly centers" and then in concentration or "internment" (or, even more euphemistically, "relocation") camps, was a matter of utmost military necessity. (Patterson1998, 103)

She goes on to point out the “disturbing irony” in the fact that while America was protesting against the Nazi concentration camps in Germany, “112,000 persons of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of whom were citizens of the United States by birth, were transported by train to internment camps” (1998, 103-104). In an excerpt of the poem, “The Question of Loyalty” by Mitsuye Yamada, we see the effect the internment had on Japanese Americans:

I am doubly loyal
to my American children
also to my own people.

How can double mean nothing? (quoted in Patterson 1998, 106)

Yamada’s doubling signifies abundance; the expansive ability to love, whereas for the American state this duality as suspect and thus reason to exclude and incarcerate, and mark its own citizens as traitors. Lawson Fudao Inada refers to the double-bind in his essay “Of Place and Displacement: The Range of Japanese American Literature”:

In the turmoil and uncertainty of the camps, the very strength of a people their sense of identity and community, their sense of worth-was called to question and became subject to doubt by the people themselves.... Being American was no longer taken for granted. In the 'double war,' they were all 'aliens.' It was as if the term 'Japanese American' no longer signified a viable whole but denoted an either/or situation, a double bind. (1982, 260)

As Radhakrishnan further asserts, “The demands of the ‘politics of location’ are complex: ‘home’ and ‘not-home’ and ‘coming’ and ‘going’ are neither literal nor figurative, but, rather, issues within the politics of ‘imaginary geographies” (1996, xvi). As a group, Asian Americans are immediately assigned to a racialised category within the “imaginary geography” of America, which brings to fore the competing ideals of assimilation versus pluralism. Assimilation is the external demand, based on the difference exhibited by Asian American bodies. Their external markers of identity become the contesting sites for authenticity and “Americanness”. They have to resist being grouped together even if they find solace within their own group. In Vasudeva’s poem, “Can You Speak Mexican?”, we see the homogenising and denigrating force of the majority group at play. As a subject of colour, the poet is immediately declared as non-American:

“Can you speak Mexican?”

They used to ask me.

“No, I’m not Mexican I’m Indian, and besides they speak Spanish,”

I used to reply, waiting eagerly for their best

Attempt at doing a “raindance.”

“Owow ooh o wow.” Smacking outstretched palms to their little mouths and hopping around.

“Not THAT kind of Indian—Indian from India.”

I would correct, as soon as they finished whooping.

“Oh...Can you talk Indian?” (quoted in Zhang 102)

Vasudeva’s poem represents an active resistance against external inscriptions of otherness on a body that is judged and convicted as not belonging to the American nation and its ‘authentic’ white citizenship. The speaking tongue resists the ignorant claims, but the body of colour cannot speak. It makes it all the more worse that the act of rejection to the body politic

is being enacted upon by children; the future generation of the American nation-state. The verb “used to” is used twice; “They used to ask me.../I used to reply,” indicating that this sort of behaviour was commonplace for a person of colour.

South Asians first arrived in America between 1904 and 1924 and were predominantly male farmers from Punjab. According to Kartak, “This class often did not speak English, and their experiences of racism, of living through the Asian Exclusion League of 1905, and the California Alien Land Act of 1913...constitute part of an important historical bedrock for a study of immigrants of the post-1960s” (1997, 193); the post 1960s immigration from South Asia was markedly different as it was made up of middle-class, upper middle-class professionals. But, despite the improved economic conditions in the post 1960s, there wasn’t much change in the attitudes towards South Asian immigrants.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s poem, “Indian Movie, New Jersey,” the speaker captures a scene inside a movie theatre, playing a Bollywood movie. The theatre turns into a replica of their homeland, where beauty and desire rests in the “tree trunk” like thighs of the plump heroine on screen; a suggestive act of seduction whereby a “brief” skirt is acceptably sexy as long as the woman is “satisfying-solid” enough to bear children and carry the burden of housework. The gendered power relations are at play. The men whistle at the woman flirting with them from behind a “flowery branch,” - an invitation, a muted promise:

Not like the white film stars, all rib
and gaunt cheekbones, the Indian sex-goddess
smiles plumply from behind a flowery
branch. Below her brief red skirt, her thighs
are satisfying-solid, redeeming
as tree trunks. She swings her hips
and the men-viewers whistle. (2010, 60-61)

The poem takes a quick turn to the performance of the “sex-goddess” as she exaggerates her thick sing-song accent instead of muting it; everyone is overjoyed. They feel see the shame that their tongues carry dissipate. Their words that drop like “lead pellets” outside the cinema, are now seen as natural. The American ears that judge their accents are the ones that are turned “foreign” inside the cinema. The cinema hall turns into a country of their own that excludes those who exclude them outside:

The sex goddess switches
to thickened English to emphasize
a joke. We laugh and clap. Here
we need not be embarrassed by words
dropping like lead pellets into foreign ears. (2010, 60-61)

But, the joy and respite found in kinship bounded by the walls of the movie theatre takes an unexpected turn:

The flickering movie-light
wipes from our faces years of America, sons
who want mohawks and refuse to run
the family store, daughters who date on the sly.
...After, we mill about
unwilling to leave, exchange greetings
and good news: a gold chain, a trip
to India. We do not speak
of motel raids, cancelled permits, stones
thrown through glass window, daughters and sons
raped by Dotbusters. (60-61)

The weary faces who slave away in motels and convenience stores on the streets of America for the bright futures of their children and grandchildren do not speak of the betrayal they suffer at the hands of their own kin. The American-born children of immigrant parents threaten to break away from the community formed within the country. The community that holds on to tradition and culture is seeing its boundaries threatened by sons who do not want to take over family businesses. And the daughter, in stark contrast to the “sex goddess” on screen cannot act out her desires and has to “date on the sly.” The cinema goers are struggling against internal threats to their ethnic identities and cultures due to integration and assimilation, but there is something even more insidious at play. They, the Indians have been indiscriminately marked by the “Dotbusters” – a reference to a racist group in New Jersey that attacked and vandalised Indian property and persons in the late 1980s, the “dot” a reference to the *bindi* worn by women of certain Indian ethnicities. They do not speak of “sons and daughters” who might be raped by Dotbusters, lest it brings shame to their families. They do not speak of their “cancelled permits” or their vandalised shops to each other, because they want to maintain the façade of having made it in America;

...Here while the film songs still echo
in the corridors and restrooms, we can trust
in movie-truths: sacrifice, success, love and luck,
the America that was supposed to be. (2010, 60-61)

The “Here” that relates to the cinema, or the idyllic home that the “we” have imagined with music that cushions their fantasy, much like the fantasy on screen. The speaker comes to the realization that this small flight of fancy helps them hold on to the dictates propagated by the movie. The faith in exalted values such as sacrifice, sums up their immigrant narrative: them leaving their homeland was the “sacrifice” they made to chase the American dream that promised success, with a bit of love and luck. Except the America they have come to know is

made up of home-truths as opposed to “movie-truths” that they are forced to confront, albeit in secrecy and in silence.

Perhaps, it was the very question of origin that prompted the visual poem “From” by Fatima Asghar, a Kashmiri-Punjabi-American poet, and Eve L. Ewing creating a triptych of codes include and exclude, but also perform the effects on inclusion and exclusion. The top panel written in English asks the question all immigrants have been affronted with, “Where are you from?” In the panel – “What they mean” the poets offer a scathing critique of both Americans asking the question and America. The use of the image of the “drone” alludes to a menacing gaze that has already deemed one as the other even before you have had the chance to state who you are while also provoking the violence of America’s drone attacks in Pakistan and elsewhere that have taken the lives and homes of many innocent civilians.



Source: Asghar and Ewing (Poetry Foundation, 2016)

The switching of codes between English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu also demonstrate the tensions between ethnic and national identities. Monica Heller described code-switching as “a boundary-levelling or a boundary maintaining strategy” (quoted in Bohata 122). The repetition of the same question in different languages make evident the borders between different ethnicities within the Asian American identity, and the demands of authenticity made by each identity on the other. Asghar’s location is forever shifting between the multiple markers of identities, but she also possesses the power to include and exclude her readers from her spaces, the same way she is excluded on the basis of her accent, her skin colour, or

her multilingual identity. The act of exhibiting her knowledge of multiple codes challenges the homogenising tendency of a single prescriptive norm. The poet feels excluded from her Hindi-speaking family because her Hindi accent is affected. She feels excluded by her English-speaking nation because she does not look like one of them. However, none of the groups that have excluded her can have complete access to her visually constructed text, because she excludes them by switching codes. As suggested by Gordon and Williams, “Deliberate code-switching may serve as a conscious technique for undermining the confidence of readers who belong exclusively to a dominant linguistic group, reminding them that they are thereby excluded from other groups, and are in fact outsiders” (quoted in Bohata 2004, 122).

Perhaps, the way towards claiming or reclaiming a home is through the use of codes, or language/s that challenge the idea of America as the “melting pot” that absorbs differences and suppresses heterogeneity. Perhaps the way forward is to use the language that has tried to repress difference against itself. As John Yau declares:

I am the Other — the chink, the lazy son, the surrealist, the uptight East Coast Banana, the poet who is too postmodern for the modernist, and too modern for the post- modernist. You have your labels, their falsifying categories, but I have words. I — the I writes — will not be spoken for. (quoted in Zhou 2006, 4)

III

Home in Language: The Reclamation through Words

“Language is the only homeland.”

Czeslaw Milosz

(quoted in Darnton, 1981)

The American linguist, Aneta Pavlenko states that the national attitude towards languages other than English was pretty relaxed before the nineteenth century and while immigrants were persecuted for their religion, lifestyles or politics, rarely were they attacked for their speech which meant that “despite concerns about immigrants’ assimilation (or, rather, lack thereof), in many places language maintenance was, if not encouraged, then at least either assisted or not tampered with” (2006, 174). However, Pavlenko goes on to point out the ideological shift that led to transforming the American national imaginary and its relationship to languages other than English:

In the forty four years between 1880 and 1924, often termed the Great Migration, approximately 24 million immigrants entered the United States (US Bureau of the Census 1975). This influx of immigrants raised numerous concerns about national unity and the capacity of American society to assimilate such a large body of newcomers. Eventually, concerns about the ‘immigrant invasion’, combined with the anti-German hysteria and xenophobia engendered by World War I, led to the convergence of Americanization, Anglicization, and Anglo-Saxonization and to the emergence of a hegemonic discourse which established English monolingualism as a constitutive part of American national identity. (2006, 174)

She goes on to quote some lines from the poem “Unguarded Gates” by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1882, in order to demonstrate how the process of “othering” languages, people and cultures was at play:

Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,
And through them passes a wild motley throng,
Men from the Volga and Tartar steppes,
Featureless figures from the Hoang-Ho,
Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt and Slav,
Flying the Old World’s poverty and scorn;
These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,
Those tiger passions here to stretch their claws,
In street and alley what strange tongues are these,
Accents of menace in our ear,
Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew. (quoted in Pavlenko 2006)

The Anglo-American superiority over “strange tongues” and repugnance at “accents of menace” gained national favour and continues to be a pervasive source for stereotypical tropes that render non-white Americans as non-Americans. As Elaine H. Kim points out in her essay, “Images of Asians,” Asian American characters became popular fodder in American literature, often serving as the linguistically challenged comedic sideshow and that to generations of Americans “Chinese English meant ‘no tickee, no washee’ ” (1982, 12). Racial stereotypes about the inability of the Asian American immigrant to master English contributed to the belief that they were inadvertently unassimilable to American culture and the American nation. We have all watched Abu from the *Simpsons* and his accent that “drops like lead pellets” like in the Divakurani’s poem, “Indian Movie Theater” mentioned earlier.

However, Americans of Chinese and Japanese descent who had been in the U.S. much before South Asians, have probably had the most ambivalent relationship with the English language. The mastery over English language became the measure of one's Americanness and any failings to that effect became a source of mockery, a source of shame, and sometimes a reason for punishment as the poet Li Young Lee recounts in his poem "Persimmons":

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker
slapped the back of my head
and made me stand in the corner
for not knowing the difference
between persimmon and precision.
How to choose
persimmons. This is precision.
Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.
Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one
will be fragrant. How to eat:
put the knife away, lay down newspaper.
Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.
Chew the skin, suck it,
and swallow. Now, eat
the meat of the fruit,
so sweet,
all of it, to the heart. (Lee 1986, 17-19)

The first stanza would lead you to believe that Lee would use the poem to express his disdain for a teacher who singled him out and punished him publicly for not knowing the difference between two words belonging to completely different semantic fields. Except, Lee, very

skilfully uses the stanza break to let the line run on and arrive at a place of knowledge, or rather experiential knowledge. Lee knows precisely how to spot a good and ripe persimmon and turns shame into erotic pleasure. In the third stanza, Lee reverts the power relations with Mrs. Walker:

Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class
and cut it up
so everyone could taste
a Chinese apple. Knowing
it wasn't ripe or sweet, I didn't eat
but watched the other faces. (17-19)

Mrs. Walker calling a persimmon a "Chinese apple" is a quiet victory for Lee, though he does not gloat, but it is also indicative of the insidious generalisation applied to Americans of Asian descent. Chinese apple is a category; a name that encompasses several fruits, with persimmon not being one of them. Like the erroneous label of Chinese apple applied to a different fruit, Asian immigrants are essentialized and perceived as a homogenous group, their differences ignored. As Zhou suggests in his book, "Alterity and Form":

Using the dominant language as a measure to separate the white national self from its racial others is part of a characteristic practice in essentializing racial "traits" by inscribing racial meanings on the body and mind of those labeled "nonwhite" in the formation of the American national identity. (Zhou 2006, 1)

Lee, however, resists the essentialization, by making his difference from the rest of his class visible through language. Lee knows well enough, that eating a raw persimmon leaves quite an unpleasant sensation in your mouth and instead he watches the facial expressions of those who do not know, what he does. While commenting on Asian American poetics Slowik

suggests that “The landscape of immigrant families is strewn not only with personal symbols that are difficult to decipher but also with public symbols wrested out of a larger cultural context that would give them meaning” (Slowik 2000, 222). In the case of Lee’s poem, the poetic turn and the subtle irony allows the poet to challenge the dominance of the English language by positing it against another kind of knowledge. Through sensory detail, Lee is able to wrest out and transform the symbolic meaning forced upon persimmon—the misspoken, misunderstood word—into meaning he places on it; the intimate knowing of not the word, but it’s texture, taste, and ironically enough, its true essence. Lee transforms persimmon, both as sign and as the signified. For Lee, his Asian American identity and his relationship to language in the mentioned poem carries a positive charge and becomes the fertile ground for transgression, creation, and recuperation.

Yet, for many Asian Americans, the aggressive assimilative policies based on privileging the English language over their mother tongues meant that many lost their native tongue and were instead coerced into believing that in order to successfully belong to the American society and the American nation, they had to master the language of the dominant group, and an affected accent or strained syntax meant that they did not belong. If our relationship with language is our relationship to our selves, what happens when we are forced to let go of our native tongue? Does it also mean letting go of a part of our self? If yes, then how do we account for the loss? In his novel, *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong, the Vietnamese American poet and novelist who came to the United States as a refugee writes:

No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure, wrote Barthes. For the writer, however, it is the mother tongue. But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of the void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is

cut out? Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely? (Vuong 2019, 31).

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, has inspired writers and theorists alike to turn their gaze to the hybrid condition created by multiple spaces, multiple languages, and multiple subjectivities against the politics of the homogenizing forces that try to repress multiplicities and portray them as inferior to the white national ideal. Anzaldúa writes about her own experience with the English language at school:

Because white eyes do not want to know us, they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, our spirit. The schools we attended or didn't attend did not give us the skills for writing nor the confidence that we were correct in using our class and ethnic languages. I, for one, became adept at, and majored in English to spite, to show up, the arrogant racist teachers who thought all Chicano children were dumb and dirty And though I now write my poems in Spanish as well as English I feel the rip-off of my native tongue ...” (2012, 10).

The “rip” that Anzaldúa refers to is reminiscent of the “rift” that Said referred to in his essay on exile mentioned earlier. The disinfecting of the tongue to rid it of its abject speech, and train it to surrender to English is perhaps the greatest loss to an immigrant writer, but Asian American writers have employed various strategies to speak of that loss, to resist that loss, and to reclaim a home in the wreckage of that loss.

One of the most prominent voices in contemporary Asian American poetry and its reclamation of the English language and subsequently America, is Cathy Park Hong, a Korean American poet. Pafunda, a poet and literary critic, refers to Hong's poetics as “germinative dialects” (2018, 195). She goes on to comment on Hong's ability to offer refuge in her language in a world that is marked by violence, displacement and war:

Over the past two war-soaked decades, Cathy Park Hong has been sojourning and sending up flares. She builds boomtowns, worlds, even those structures in which we might shelter—homes. You don't follow a road to get to her. You follow the tongues.
(195)

Hong uses language to expand, exhaust and exhibit difference. She takes the language of the English canon and makes it not so pristine, not so inaccessible; a retort perhaps to the oppression of the language itself. Her “germinative dialects” make their presence visible and audible in this excerpt from her poem “Notorious”:

Biggum Wallah, Biggum Wallah, why so glum?
You in heaven, na, be happy.
You are Hip Hop's Grand Panjandrum in white foxy mink
snuggly over your Bluto belly,
& this fleet of white Cucci Gucci Hummers is for you, ji.

(Hong 2018a, Notorious 190).

By appropriating the voices, the sounds, the speech of immigrant communities, the persona of the tour guide in Hong's poem is not part of the melting pot that America is meant to be, but the borderlands of marginality. However, by speaking in polyphonic tongues, Hong gives voice to the voices of the underbelly of America and its colonial outliers. As Kim argues;

The immigrant American's struggles with English have been a staple of American humour...the comic Chinese dialect is characterized by high-pitched, sing-song tones, tortured syntax, the confounding of l's and r's, the proliferation of ee-endings, and the random omission of articles and auxiliary verbs. (1982, 12)

Hong, by challenging the syntactical norms of the English language and by inserting slang tries to invert the very dominance of its desired sanctity. But one could also see Hong's poem as a foil to American writers who used Pidgin and China Town as source material to portray

the Asians as abject. For instance, Elaine Kim refers to Charles G. Leland's *Pidgin English Sing Song* which was presented as a "collection of songs and stories in Chinese-American dialect" (Kim 1982, 11), and was a huge commercial success. Kim quotes an excerpt from the collection:

Ping-wing he pie-man son.

He velly worst chilo alló Can'tón.

He steal he mother piclum mice,

And thlowee cat in bilin' rice.

Hab chow-chow up, and "Now," talk he,

"my wonda' where he meow can be?" (quoted in Kim 1982, 12)

Pafunda refers to Hong's manipulated English as desert pidgin; "While the Desert pidgin blossoms from a grim compost of lost homes, names, and heritages, it also suggests a lyricism more desirable than the lost things themselves. This pidgin is thus both elegiac and embracing." (2018, 201). Hong's own take on her style and form suggests an act of stealth and political dissent:

Since I am a Korean American female poet, I am heir to nothing in particular. The closest lineage I have are writers who make the unmastering of English their rallying cry, who deterritorialize it, queer it, twerk it, hack it, Calibanize it, other it into another language. Over time, there has been an efflorescence of verbs that describes what Deleuze and Guattari call the minoritization of language, or, in other words, the hijacking of Standard English and warping it to a fugitive tongue. (Hong 2018b,192)

The poetics of deterritorialization inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's take on "minor literature" is perhaps better explained by Kaplan:

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari use the term "deterritorialization" to locate this moment of alienation and exile in language and literature. In one sense it describes the

effects of radical distanciation between signifier and signified. Meaning and utterances become estranged. This defamiliarization enables imagination, even as it produces alienation, ‘to express another potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. (1987, 188)

Franny Choi’s poem, “To the Man Who Shouted ‘I Like Pork Fried Rice’ at Me on the Street,” reiterates a racial objectification of her person, but turns it around into a retaliatory address that exposes the historical dehumanisation of Asian American people, as well as the fetishization and degradation of the Asian American female body. Her poem relies linguistically on the semantic field of the abject; but she estranges the sign from the signified. By employing images and sites of abjection as a source of ironic identification, the poet inverts the power relationship between the white gaze and the uncanny object/s of that gaze to present the subtle threat of reprisal:

you want to eat me
out. right. what does it taste like
you want to eat me right out
of these jeans & into something
a little cheaper. more digestible.
more bite-sized. more thank you
come: i am greasy
for you. i slick my hair with MSG
every morning. i’m bad for you.
got some red-light district between
your teeth. what does it
taste like: a takeout box
between my legs.

plastic bag lady. flimsy white fork

to snap in half. dispose of me. (Choi 2014)

The poem almost relies on a word cloud of stereotypes and slurs used to portray Chinese Americans and their culture, such as, “greasy,” “MSG,” “red-light district,” “plastic bag lady,” “flimsy white fork,” “foreign,” “dirty meat”. Choi’s poem is also a critique of the highly fetishized bodies of Asian American women. The first stanza positions the persona as an edible seductress. She gives voice to the racialized object by turning into a sexual being with the wilful agency to re-appropriate the external signs of the racial body, and the female body as a sex object in order to reject the projected identity. Equating an Asian American female body to “Pork Fried Rice,” the desired product of a race that is undesirable, displays the underlying symptoms of white America’s ambivalent relationship to the Asian American community; one that is measured by the degree of utility or exoticness it might offer without disrupting the status-quo. Butler’s theory on gender performance carries a negative charge, in the sense that the gendered subject lacks the agency and is trapped by codes that elicit a performativity. Butler writes, “Performativity is thus not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norm” (1993, 12). But, what Choi seems to be doing in her poem is staging a performance of performativity. By employing racial tropes and stereotypes used against the Chinese community, and “oriental” women, Choi forces the male gaze to divert on to themselves close to achieving what Cheng calls “a form of agency that recognizes a competition between performance and performativity” (2001, 59).

As Lisa Lowe suggests, “The differentiation of Asian immigrant from the national citizenry is marked not only politically but culturally as well: retracted through images, memories, and narratives—submerged, fragmented, and sedimented in a historical ‘unconscious’—it is rearticulated in Asian American culture through the emergence of

alternative identities and practices” (2007, 12), or perhaps even a new nation if we follow Inada’s suit in an excerpt from his poem, “Kicking the Habit”:

Late last night, I decided to

stop using English.

I had been using it all day—

talking all day,

listening all day,

thinking all day,

remembering all day,

and even driving all day,

in English—

when finally I decided to

stop.

So I pulled off the main highway

onto a dark country road

and kept on going and going

until I emerged in another nation and...

stopped. (quoted in Zhang 86-87).

Inada’s poem starts off as a satire on his relationship to the English language. As a third-generation Japanese American who at the age of four was put in an internment camp with his family, Inada’s relationship to the English language is ambivalent. It is his mother tongue, the subjective element of what constitutes his place and stake in the nation that he was born into, yet the same nation-state deemed him and his family as enemies. Japanese Americans sent to internment camps were asked to do the impossible. They were condemned for not being loyal, and yet the loyalty that was demanded was impossible since they could not change

their origin or the way they looked. But his poem also offers a new opening into the possibility of a space that parallels the idea of a single nation. If language is the subjective element upon which a homeland rests its emotions, then what stops a different language from doing the same for a different community? Perhaps, it is language and what poets writers do with it that holds the key to a changed nation, a different nation, a plural nation.

Conclusion

This research was tasked with exploring and dissecting the different meanings of home that might inform and shape the immigrant narrative of Asian Americans. This was done by privileging poems from dissimilar and diverging subject positions and viewing them as textual sites for remembering, recuperating, representing, and reclaiming.

The amalgamation of various conceptual approaches towards home suggests that home encompasses and embodies multiple meanings depending on whether we perceive it as place, a space, a structure, a construct, or an emotion. Home may extend from the private and domestic space to the public sphere and determine one's position or place within that sphere; it may intermingle the physical with the spiritual, the material with the immaterial, the past with the present, and the self with the social.

It is also evident that to be separated from one's home and homeland surmounts to not just the loss of a loved place, but also the loss of one's culture, language, community, and kin. Some poems have emerged as nostalgic recreations of the homes left behind, however, the nostalgia is bitter-sweet as the recreation is only partial, since the distance from the place, does not offer a reconciliation of the physical body with the remembered place. But, writing home as an act of recuperation does have the potential to offer some relief to the grieving subject, and the process of writing in itself might be cathartic as reflected in the works of Ali.

On the other hand, if one's relationship to the homeland is the very cause of one's displacement, the poems become a charged location for disillusionment or critical dissent as evident in Ha Jin and Dhompa's works, and perhaps it is the very distance that allow the poets to reflect on the social and cultural fabric of their native countries. The poets have responded to the loss in different ways depending on the causes of their displacement and their ability to return to the lost place.

While memory is a way of recuperating a nostalgic past, it can also become the site for articulating communal and familial loss that might be lived or inherited. However, the textual analyses suggest that when a poet writes about his or her home of the past, the past is also making its presence felt in the location of his or her present, and it is the negotiation between the past and the present that influences the process of homemaking in a new place. While poets such as Ali offer an optimistic view of inhabiting multiple places and being at home in multiple places, we must also acknowledge the alienation experienced by poets such as Lim, who despite her desire to finally surrender to a place and work towards making it her home, is not free from angst.

While poetics of exile might share common themes such as loss, alienation, and nostalgia, the writing of home or writing about home is distinctly different when considering the disparate and divergent socio-historical conditions that go on to produce the exilic condition. In immigrant or exilic poetics, we often find historical memory oscillating between the individual and the collective. Poets write about their departures and their arrivals from different subject positions and their writings often reckon with the loss of a home that was once inhabited in person or inhabited in spirit. An immigrant's child has to reckon with a loss on two levels: he or she has to mourn for her parent's loss and deal with the consequence of that loss that she has inherited from her parents. The past continually haunts and entraps the individual even if the memory of a homeland has been inherited.

Furthermore, the poetics of home might be about an individual's endeavour and desire to claim a place, but when the concept of home extends to encompass a country or a nation, we are confronted with the contest between internal and external forces. As discussed, Asian Americans—irrespective of the generation they belong to—have had to historically resist external forces that continue to view them as racial subjects who are deemed as not belonging to the American nation that might prefer to imagine its true citizen to be a white Caucasian.

The national imaginary, founded on exclusionary rhetoric, does not allow for Asian Americans to be just Americans, or allow immigrants to be just citizens. The external inscriptions that mark the body as incompatible to the body politic has systematically and systemically kept its own citizens at the margins, based on their race and ethnicity. Even those who might have assimilated to meet the demands of the American ideal are questioned about their point of origin, negating the opportunity for the subject to claim that their point of origin is the very country that does not accept them. In the light of this, we find a double consciousness playing out in the poems of Asian Americans who are cornered into picking a side or proving their loyalty.

The contestation between ethnic identity and national identity has produced different types of responses. For poets such as Mirikitani, whose family was interned, the act of claiming America as their home is done through confronting America with its own dark past. This might be an attempt at forging a reparative condition that is founded on articulating grief and rage, whereas poets such as Chin and Mura are more concerned with focusing their resistance on making their difference visible to the dominant group, fully inhabiting the hybrid space charged with creativity and different strategies of selfhood, as described by Bhabha.

However, it should also be noted that while hybridity carries a positive charge, it raises questions regarding collective action. While strategies of selfhood are important to contest an individual's place in the nation-state, there needs to be a strategy for pushing back at dominant forces as a collective group. Americans of Asian origin have to negotiate their subjectivity against familial and national demands on their identities. Their bifurcated minds, and split selves are indicative of the tussle between what they inherit from their familial cultural mores and the dominant cultural values of the American nation; the tussle between one's ethnic identity and how it sits within the map of the American conception of a

homogenous national identity. Therefore a political approach to challenging the hegemony of institutions, systems, and pervasive constructs required a concerted and collective effort whereby the “I” speaks for the “we”, as shown in poems by Woo and Mirikitani. As Piñero suggests, “Forgetfulness and self-denial become the most effective weapons against the recognition of an ethnic identity” (2002, 104). Poets such as Mirikitani and Woo use both their individual and collective positions as Asian American poets to articulate the process of othering imposed on them in order to resist forgetting. To have been so easily branded as the enemy in your own country of birth can only produce a sense of immense alienation and displacement. But instead of remaining silent, Asian American poets rage against the hegemonising forces of an American nation that has excluded them from the polity; for the American nation sees their bodies as not commensurable with their body politic.

The act of resistance is also visible in the site of language and text. Hong believes in “cannibalizing” the English language in an effort to insert all the different dialects, and speech patterns that truly represent the different voices that make up the American nation, and in the process of doing so Hong creates a home for all those voices in the English language. Similarly, as represented in Li Young Lee’s work, by challenging the very ontological and epistemological foundations of the word as sign and signified, and by drawing on multiple sources of knowledge, it is possible to challenge the symbolic terrain that excludes Asian Americans. Similarly, poets like Choi have demonstrated that it is possible to turn the abject in the English language into the empowered. Such textual practices goes beyond the act of remembering and negotiating, and instead is focused on assertion and reclamation.

In conclusion, Asian American poetics on home is diverse and divergent. It might not offer a single solution to the challenges of homemaking, but what it does do is offer solace, solidarity, and hope. In movements marked by departures and arrivals, the one thing that

might be true is that the featured poets are creating a new vocabulary that allows them and us, the readers, to make sense of our displacements.

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