

TRANSCULTURAL INTERTEXTUALITY: READING ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN
POETRY

by

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To
My Parents

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Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	vii
Introduction	
The Practice of Transcultural Intertextuality	1
Chapter One	
The Home and the World: The Cosmopolitanism of Agha Shahid Ali’s Poetry	21
Chapter Two	
“Continental Drift”: Kimiko Hahn’s Translational Poetics	64
Chapter Three	
“Faking it”: Fred Wah’s Performative Language	104
Chapter Four	
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Intermedia Texts: A Visual Poetry	147
Conclusion	
“New Directions” for Asian North American Poetry?	197
Works Cited	203

Abstract

Studying Asian North American poetry since the 1960s, this dissertation defines “transcultural intertextuality” as a border-crossing practice that engages with multiple histories and interweaves elements from a wide range of cultural and literary traditions. Specifically, I read four poets—Agha Shahid Ali, Kimiko Hahn, Fred Wah, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha—and argue that studying this practice expands the scope of Asian North American literary criticism, as it urges us to rethink ethnicity beyond domestic boundaries of the nation. Analyzing the poets in various intertextual relationships, this study demonstrates how poetic analysis can enhance our understanding of the transcultural impulse of Asian North American literature.

This dissertation pays particular attention to these poets’ formal strategies as ways of negotiating with dominant social discourses on national history, international relations, gender, and ethnic identities. The organization of the chapters follows a trajectory of poetic form, moving from traditional verse to experimental texts. Chapter one examines Ali’s writing on home and the world through his deployment of traditional forms such as the ghazal, which allow for both the historical and contemporary theorizations of “cosmopolitanism.” Chapter two studies Hahn’s criticism and practice of translation in her innovative poetry by drawing upon the theories of Walter Benjamin, Gayatri Spivak, and *l’écriture féminine* in order to understand how her transcultural feminist poetics challenges self/other dichotomy. By invoking Jacques Derrida’s and Judith Butler’s

theorization of the “performative,” chapter three examines Wah’s avant-garde, performative poetic language and shows how it interrogates the usual ways in which language works in defining racial and ethnic identity. Finally, chapter four reads Cha’s intermedia “visual poetry” in relation to art criticism and feminist film criticism of the 1970s. The chapter examines the dynamics between her aesthetic concerns and critique of imperial power in rewriting Korean and Korean American history. These poets do not merely write about exilic and diasporic experience; they foreground the very process of border-crossing through their formal and theoretical experimentation. Ethnic identity in this process reveals itself to be a dynamic concept that needs to be understood in complicated international and intercultural relations.

Introduction

The Practice of Transcultural Intertextuality

This dissertation examines Asian North American poetry since the 1960s from a transcultural perspective that emphasizes the ways in which poets explore possibilities of writing across linguistic, national, and cultural borders. Specifically, I read the works of four poets—Agha Shahid Ali, Kimiko Hahn, Fred Wah, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. I study how their writings trouble and complicate the category of “Asian North American poetry” with “transcultural intertextuality,” a poetic practice of interweaving elements from different national and cultural traditions in ways that require comparative, border-crossing reading strategies. Through the analysis of their poetic forms, genres, language, as well as themes, this dissertation seeks to show how poetic analysis can enhance our understanding of the transcultural dimension of Asian North American literature through an emphasis on formalist interpretation. Ultimately, I argue that reading these poets can broaden the scope of Asian American literary criticism, as their transcultural intertextuality urges us to reconsider ethnicity and ethnic writing in international and intercultural relationships.

“Trans-”cultural Intertextuality

To unravel the poetic practice of transcultural intertextuality, I find the prefix “trans-” to be a productive starting point. In an essay written in 1994, on writing as a poet of mixed race identity, Wah proposes “the poetics of the ‘trans-’” as a means of

“claim[ing] a space for the particular poetics of racialized writing” (Faking It 4). He believes that for himself and many other racial and ethnic minority writers, the hyphen—a sign used in or dropped from terms that identify minoritized groups such as “Asian Canadian”—provides a space for exploring racial and ethnic identities and possibilities of writing (Faking It 72-73). Through “methods of translation, transference, transition, transposition,” all of which evoke the sense of moving from one site (language, place, or situation) to another, the poetics of trans- emphasizes writing as a process of moving and examines identity at its “passage position” (90-92). In other words, it explores identity as fluid and dynamic, rather than static, in a number of “formal and semiological” ways (92). In the context of official Canadian multiculturalism, Wah’s notion of “trans-” specifically indicates an attempt to move beyond and resist the homogenizing “nationalistic aesthetic that continually attempts to expropriate difference into its own consuming narrative” (75).

Wah’s poetics of the trans- is relevant to the other three poets studied here as well. These poets actively travel between and interweave geographies, histories, and cultural traditions into the fabric of their texts. Their works are marked by acts of moving and resistance against fixed categorization, as they narrate physical journeys, make cross-cultural references, translate, and adopt forms from other literary traditions. In their very processes of thematic and formal border-crossing, the four poets intervene in dominant social discourses on national history, international relations, gender, racial and ethnic identities and thus enable a reconsideration of “Asian American” or “Asian Canadian” poetry. They strive to accomplish more than making a place for Asian minorities in North America. Not only do they explore ethnic identity within the domestic contexts of the United States or Canada through their personal or familial histories of immigration. Their

works also reference cultural and literary traditions of Asia, North America, and beyond, and critically engage with the unequal and fraught relations between North American and Asian countries. Their geographical and metaphorical “travel” in multiple directions makes their writings a particular kind of “Asian North American poetry.” In this poetry, Asia, where their parents, grandparents, or they themselves are “from,” represents not only a past and a memory but also an important coordinate that defines their present position in a web of intersecting cultural and political forces. It appears in a variety of forms as “imaginary homeland,” destiny for an exile’s journey home, nexus of memory and the present, as well as literary form or literary tradition. “America,” too, appears as an unstable, fluid concept expanding to its more inclusive form, the Americas: the United States, Canada, and South America.

What their works reveal, therefore, is not a body of “immigrant literature” but rather a poetic discourse of “travel” that crosses linguistic, national, and cultural borders,¹ which exceeds the paradigm of studying ethnic literature within national boundaries and requires a mode of transcultural and intertextual reading that traverses national and cultural boundaries. Ali explicitly resists the idea of any racially- and ethnically-focused categorization and would see himself as a “poet in English” (Interview with Christine Benvenuto). Kashmir, his homeland, is the focus of many of his works, and the United States, the place where he established his writing career, also occupies a significant part of his poetic landscape. However, concerned with places like Bosnia and Peru as well, his poetry is more than the combination of “Asia,” where he is from, and “America,” where

¹ I am inspired by Oscar V. Campomanes’s theorization of Filipino American literature as “a literature of exile and emergence rather than a literature of immigration and settlement” (51). I am not saying the poets write from the same (inter)cultural position as the Filipino American authors in Campomanes’s criticism. Like him, I believe Asian North American literature does not necessarily mean “immigrant literature.”

he writes poetry. His intertextual references to Irish and British poets further enriches this poetic world and makes visible his ambivalent attitude toward British tradition. Without a vast landscape like Ali's, Hahn's poetry is more geographically focused. Her persistent interest in classical Japanese literary texts and forms draws attention to a particular kind of cross-cultural encounter, which emphasizes immediacy and attempts to subvert stereotypes of "other" cultures. For her, Asian American literature is not merely the ethnically-marked writings based in the United States but includes numerous works "inspired by / influenced by Asian literature" (Narrow Road to the Interior 93). She herself uses several classical Japanese literary forms in her poetry in order to explore ways of translating without exoticizing the other. Both Wah's and Cha's poetry, in different ways, also point to redefinitions of ethnic writing, in spite of a significant portion of their work being produced during the period of an emerging Asian Canadian cultural and political activism and the Asian American movement of the 1970s. Wah's poetry does not merely focus on issues of Chinese Canadian or Asian Canadian identity in Canada. Expanding the notion of "writing ethnically" to that of "writing ethically," his experimental poetry is concerned with the history of other ethnic groups such as Native Americans as well (Faking It 58). For Cha, the personal experience as a Korean American woman is entangled in the modern history of Korea and its colonial and imperial relations with Japan and the United States. Her exploration of exilic identity is, therefore, not solely linked to the question of Korean American identity within the United States but is simultaneously woven within complicated international relations.

The poets' poetics the trans- can be seen through the various modes of transcultural intertextuality in these poets' works. The word "transcultural" is defined in

the Oxford English Dictionary as “transcending the limitations or crossing the boundaries of cultures; applicable to more than one culture.” I prefer this term to the more commonly used “transnational” for its inclusiveness. For “transnational” may not be completely applicable to the poets I study, as what concerns them may not be “nations” per se. The “travel” in Ali’s poetry—with his links between Islamic and Christian cultures, South Asian and Native American histories, for example—is more between “cultures” than between “nations.” Defining the poets’ writing as “transcultural,” my study, however, does not ignore the issues of “nation” and “nationalism” in their texts. For Ali, “nation,” or “country,” is always already deferred, a future out of reach. Kashmir, the focus of his book The Country without a Post Office and many poems elsewhere, is not really a “country.” He is not unaware of the problem. In regards to the territorial dispute over Kashmir among India, Pakistan, China, and the people of Kashmir, Ali once stated that “ideally the best solution would be absolute autonomy within the Indian Union in the broadest sense,” but given the current reality, he knew that “such a solution was [probably] no longer possible” (qtd. in Ghosh). Hahn’s poetry also shows a culture- and language-focused “travel.” Yet to understand it, one must take into consideration her intentional shunning of the topic of “nation,” or the history of the conflict between the United States and Japan during World War II and its consequence for Japanese Americans. Hahn’s mother, a Japanese American artist, resists Japanese culture as many Japanese Americans of her generation do (Interview with Sheck). Influenced both by this attitude of her mother and by her German American father’s interest in Japanese tradition, Hahn’s passion for classical Japanese literature is not nation-centered but mainly oriented toward the pre-national, premodern Japanese culture.

As Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helff have reminded us in their introduction to a recent collection of “transcultural English studies” by European scholars, it is necessary to take into account the social and political inequality between nations and cultures while doing transcultural literary studies. My project does not merely celebrate the poets’ transcultural writings. In light of the aftermath of colonialism as well as the current increasingly globalized world, I read their works as intertexts, which requires a mode of comparative close reading, a movement between their work and the various literary and artistic texts to which they refer.

“Intertextuality” is a thread that runs through the four chapters of this study. It marks the dynamic ways in which the four poets practice their transcultural writings. The concept of intertextuality is usually traced to Julia Kristeva’s definition which itself is based on M. M. Bakhtin. For Kristeva, intertextuality is found in “the space of a given text,” wherein “several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (37). Each text is always “the absorption and transformation of another” (37). She states that “every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems, [...and] its ‘place’ of enunciation and its denoted ‘object’ are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated” (111). Appropriating Bakhtin’s sociolinguistic theory of language, Kristeva, however, looks at texts and their possible “transformation” and “transposition” as a result of the instability of signification. Barthes’s “The Death of the Author,” written two years after Kristeva coined the word “intertextuality” in 1968, theorizes the text in a similar way. Eliminating the idea of the author’s intentionality, Barthes also finds texts to be “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146). Ali, Hahn,

Wah, and Cha demonstrate the idea of multiplicity central to these theories of intertextuality. They work in the “fields of transposition” and indeed engage with what Barthes calls “innumerable centres of culture.” Their texts foreground the plurality of meaning and draw attention to the interrelationships between their texts and those of their literary predecessors. However, their concerns with issues such as race and ethnicity, gender, war, and nation, make their intertextual poetics more akin to a Bakhtinian approach to language. My reading of these poets especially attends to the social, historical, and political realities in which their intertextual poetics is grounded. Moreover, while Kristeva and Barthes’ theories do not take the author’s agency into consideration, this study is especially concerned with how each of the poets develops his or her unique voice through diverse intertextual practices, how their literary choices may relate to their ethnic background as Asian American or Asian Canadian, and the political, social, and cultural implications of their literary choices.

Along with attention to author’s agency, my model of intertextuality is influenced by the theorization of intertextuality by American critics in the past three decades. Unlike Kristeva or Barthes, American scholars of intertextuality have attended to authors’ agency and intentionality in certain historical, social, and political circumstances. For example, in an essay written in 1986, the feminist critic Nancy Miller proposes a “political intertextuality,” which she explains as a “subversion,” a positionality that involves “placing oneself at a deliberately oblique (or textual) angle to intervention,” and a “form of negotiation with the dominant social text” (111-112). In an essay published in 1991, Susan Friedman values the importance of taking the author back into account by extending Miller’s idea of “political intertextuality” to the studies of not only women’s

literature but also that of ethnic minorities as a useful model for “reading the political in the textual and intertextual” (159). While Miller’s and Friedman’s theorizations are based upon their studies of literary fiction, Aldon Nielsen includes both fiction studies and poetic analysis in his 1994 book Writing between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality. In his study of C. L. R. James, Robert Hayden, and James Weldon Johnson, Nielsen reveals the “multiracial birth legacy” of American literature. He provides a useful model for intertextual reading, as it recognizes “the permeability of the walls racism has erected in language” and reads “the significations in the explosive passages back and forth between the meaning system brought into being as white writing and the systematic disruptions of black writing” (22). If Miller focuses on how the intertextuality of feminist literature subverts the “dominant social text” regarding gender relations, Nielsen aims his critique solely on the dominant racial discourse that segregates African American literature from white canonical writers. Throughout the detailed analysis of male writers and poets and his brief discussion of two women authors in the epilogue, Nielsen’s book lacks sufficient attention to the question of how issues of gender relations and race often intersect and interarticulate.

Like the writers in Nielsen’s study, the poets in this project consciously produce texts that are also intertexts, of which no interpretation is possible without understanding the authors, forms, and traditions with which they engage. Yet, while Miller’s and Nielsen’s models focus on critiquing a particular kind of “dominant social text,” respectively regarding gender or race, I see the poets in my study negotiating with or resisting multiple dominant social texts. Analyzing their use of citation, allusion, translation, imitation, and formal adoption, I study the ways in which they may depart

from, resist, or rewrite canonical or mainstream Anglo-American poetic traditions.² I also examine how their “political intertextuality” interrogates the language usually used in defining gender, racial, and ethnic identities, and how it reconsiders the history of colonialism especially in regard to the imperial power of the United States. In an essay about ethnic minority poets’ stylistic choices, Wah urges us to consider “whether the lyrically constituted speaking and spoken subject that is troublesome for some racialized writers is at all similar to the trouble it is for, say, Ron Silliman or Daphne Marlatt. Just as political” (Faking It 125). Indeed, if an ethnic minority poet chooses to write in a certain form, does s/he do so out of the same aesthetic and political concerns as white poets? Are his or her “political” concerns to be read or evaluated in the same ways as those of white experimental poets such as Silliman and Marlatt, who write also with “political” resistance against certain social discourses? My comparative intertextual reading takes these questions into account and analyzes each poet’s specific position in relation to mainstream poetry in English and multiple social discourses. Through a political intertextuality these poets enact a transcultural writing, in which the United States, or Canada, is not necessarily the center of attention in its relationship with Asian cultures or nations.

How exactly, or in what forms, do the poets in this study practice their transcultural intertextuality? I read the respective formal strategies of each poet and explore their poetic forms as structures closely linked to their thoughts on such related

² I am aware how problematic the term “mainstream” can be, given the numerous debates around issues of “canon” in the past two decades. “Mainstream” is used here to refer to the works that have long been critically established and included in major anthologies. Although having a history since the end of the 19th century, Asian American poetry did not receive any critical attention and was mostly excluded from major anthologies until recently. For discussions of canonization and other related issues, see Golding and Perloff’s Poetic License.

issues as migration, gender, race and ethnicity both in national and transnational or transcultural settings. In her introduction to a collection of recent Asian American criticism, Colleen Lye sees form as “inevitably a social relationship” and calls attention to the importance of “investigat[ing] race and nation through the relationship between aesthetic and social modalities of form” (7, 9). Formal analysis is especially indispensable to the study of poetry. My study seeks to explore the “aesthetic and social” significance of form in these poets, as a starting point to better understand the intertwined aesthetic and social aspects of “Asian North American poetry.” In his very recent study that links Language poets and Asian American poets, Timothy Yu discerns a formal concern throughout the development of Asian American poetry. He argues for a reading that foregrounds “the continuity of the Asian American avant-garde” (74), because he finds that Asian American poets “approach questions of Asian American identity” not only from the perspective of race and ethnicity but also through “debates about poetic form” (7). However, his emphasis on the avant-garde elides the significance of those works in more conventional forms. The poets in this project write in a variety of border-crossing forms. The difference in the extent to which they experiment with existing forms and media of written poetry requires careful consideration. If the term “avant-garde” is initially associated with the early-twentieth-century art and cultural movements such as Dada and Surrealism, characterized by revolutionary, futuristic styles,³ Wah and Cha seem to demonstrate more avant-garde characteristics than Ali and Hahn. Nevertheless, Hahn’s use of ancient Japanese forms is revolutionary, too, for her poetry writing in English. The organization of my chapters follows a trajectory of poetic form, moving

³ See Perloff’s preface to her [The Futurist Moment](#), for a discussion of “avant-garde,” with reference to Poggioli and others’ theorization of the concept.

from the more traditional verse of Ali to Hahn's increasingly innovative poems, then to Wah's poetics that shows avant-garde influence on diction, semantic, and generic levels, and finally to Cha's highly experimental intermedia works. In this way, my study seeks to demonstrate the wide range of poetics of Asian North American poetry, on the one hand, and, on the other, to elucidate the significance of examining form as a historicized, culturally loaded site for Asian North American literary studies.

Poetry in Transnational Asian North American Studies?

I use "Asian North American poetry" in this study instead of the more commonly used "Asian American poetry" to describe these poets, who are based in the United States or Canada and are of different Asian ancestries. As Eleanor Ty and Donald Goellnicht have noted, "Asian American" has been a contested term, from which certain Asian American groups such as South Asians often feel excluded (2). The term has been a "particularly vexed" one for the Asian Canadian community, too, since it elides the political, national, and cultural differences of Asian Canadian cultures (Ty and Goellnicht 2). Therefore they propose to use "Asian North American" as a more inclusive term in the study of Asian American and Asian Canadian cultures. I adopt their term to better describe these poets as a group without losing sight of their distinctive cultural allegiances and ethnic positioning within their respective national and transnational situations.

However, I do not see this group of poets, as the only representatives of transcultural Asian North American poetry nor intend to exclude other works as purely dominated by domestic concerns. In earlier Asian North American poetry, for example,

the Filipino American poet José Garcia Villa's work of the 1930s and 1940s especially shows a transcultural impulse with poems that locate "a 'peculiar Malayan/Pacific' habitus in his engagements with modernist form" (Yu "Asian/American Modernism"). Yet I choose to study Asian North American poetry since the 1960s for the following reasons. The past few decades since the 1960s are marked by a tremendous development in economic transnationalism, which increasingly affects intercultural and international relations. The four poets studied here, from different Asian ethnic groups and with different evocations of "trans-" writing, provide diverse angles from which to see how issues regarding Asian North American ethnicity are closely linked to the United States' or Canada's relationship with Asian nations and cultures.

More importantly, with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 in the United States and in 1967 in Canada, which reversed decades of exclusion and restriction regarding immigration from Asia and other Third World countries, the population of Asian origin increased dramatically in the two countries. There has been a subsequent rapid development in Asian American and Asian Canadian literature and literary criticism. Asian American poetry began to attract extensive attention with the works of such poets as Lawson Inada, Janice Mirikitani, John Yau, Cathy Song, Li-Young Lee, and David Mura in the 1970s and 1980s. From his research on poetry appearing in Asian American publications of the time, Timothy Yu observes that many Asian American poetic writings in the 1970s were "politically charged and direct, angry and passionate, frequently reaching for a populist aesthetic" (73). In the 1980s and 1990s, Asian American poetry became increasingly dominated by a group of poets, whose "MFA mainstream" poems highlighted personal voice, family history, and ethnically distinctive

experience.⁴ The four poets studied here do not fit easily into the models of Asian American poetry summarized in the critical surveys.⁵ In contrast to poets such as Inada and Lee, they did not draw much critical attention as significant Asian North American poets until 1990s, even though Wah has published since the late 1960s and has been an important poet in Canada; Cha published most of her works in the 1970s and early 1980s and left a stunning body of written and visual work when she died in 1982; Ali and Hahn both began their careers as poets in the 1980s and continued to produce prize-winning collections in the 1990s.

Calling more attention to these under-researched poets, this dissertation also seeks to demonstrate the significance of studying poetry in illuminating the transcultural dimension of Asian North American literature. In response to the expanding critical discourse of transnational Asian North American studies, this study shows, through the lens of poetic analysis, how ethnicity and ethnic writing need to be understood in a web of international and intercultural relations. Sau-ling Wong's much debated 1995 essay "Denationalization Reconsidered" has inspired a range of discussions on how to reframe Asian American literary and cultural criticism in the current global context. Wong criticizes the emerging "diasporic perspective" in Asian American cultural criticism and instead privileges a "domestic perspective," from which to emphasize studying Asian Americans "as an ethnic/racial minority within the national boundaries of the United

⁴ See Yu, for the notion of the "MFA mainstream" poetry with its emphasis on "personal voice, epiphanic insight, and loose verse form" (73).

⁵ Whenever I introduce this project to non-Asian Americanists or scholars of Asian American prose, I often receive a surprised comment such as, "Not typical Asian American poets!" Who are "typical" Asian American poets? Li-Young Lee seems to be a name everyone would easily associate with "Asian American poetry." Other figures such as Lawson Inada, John Yau, and Marilyn Chin may come up depending on the scholars' interests and breadth of knowledge. Although designated as Asian American or Asian Canadian poets in anthologies and criticism, the poets I study here do not seem to be representative enough for "Asian North American poetry."

States” (2). Yet, in the following decade many scholars, including Susan Koshy, Lisa Lowe, David Palaumbo-Liu, and David L. Eng, began to think about Asian American studies in contexts beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Lowe, for example, in her groundbreaking Immigrant Acts has noted the necessity of situating the Asian American subject not only within “the U.S. state” but in “the histories of wars in Asia, immigration, and the dynamics of the current global economy” as well (33). Eng, in the epilogue to his influential Racial Castration, has also suggested that we should “force Asian American studies beyond the borders of the domestic” (212). He reminds us of the inseparability and “interpenetration” of the diasporic and the domestic dimensions of the formation of “Asian American as a political identity and an oppositional social movement” (213). These scholars focus their work mostly on prose narrative and film. How relevant is the question of transnationalism to Asian North American poetry?

A recent critical anthology Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits devotes one third of its essays to poetry criticism. The book is organized in three sections, each covering one of the three genres—fiction, memoir/autobiography, and poetry (17). However, the editors do not explain how each of the genres may reveal in different ways the “national and transnational formulations of Asian American imaginations” (2). One wonders how the study of the aesthetic and political significance of genres and forms, particularly in the case of poetry, might shed light on our understanding of Asian North American literature beyond nation-based focuses. As Jahan Ramazani insightfully observes in A Transnational Poetics, poetry provides a unique perspective for transnational literary studies, as modern and contemporary poetry in English is significantly marked by transnational and cross-cultural elements which

fundamentally problematize the nation-based categorization. Ramazani's survey ranges from modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot and Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay, to contemporary American ethnic poets such as Agha Shahid Ali and Lorna Goodison as well as black British poets such as Lord Kitchener. His study, however, does not specify the many kinds of "transnationalisms" which differ in the ways in which, and the extent to which, the poets (re)consider the power of nation, the history of colonization, and the politics of race and ethnicity. How might "transnationalism" or transnational writing be an inevitable choice for some of these groups or poets due to certain political and social conditions, but entirely voluntary in cases of others? How is a certain poet's cross-cultural adoption of a language or a form to be read in relation to his or her ethnic or cultural identity? How do contemporary ethnic poets' transnational transcultural writings participate in the contemporary discourse on race and ethnicity?

One recent work on Asian American poetry that does address these questions is Josephine Park's Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics (2008). Park studies Asian American writers in relation to "American Orientalism," by which she refers to the recurrence of East Asia in American literary and cultural history from Walt Whitman, Ernest Fenollosa, Ezra Pound, to Gary Snyder. Examining Asian American literature's ambiguous relationship to this body of Orientalist literature, Park examines contemporary Asian American literature, writers including Inada, Cha, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Myung Mi Kim, "as a continuing dialogue with the burden of transpacific relations" (19). For Park, these poets are "ambassadors of culture," who represent new "crossings on a bridge constructed by American alliances with the Far East" (22). In spite of her insightful readings and nuanced tracing of Asian American

poets' relation to dominant poetic discourses, Park's "bridge" and "ambassador" metaphors beg the question of whether ethnic poetry ultimately promotes understanding between cultures, or introduces an "other" to the white "self," and whether this implies an ethnographic responsibility for ethnic writing.

My study attends to the transpacific political and cultural relations between the United States and Asian, as Park's book does. However, I do not see their writings functioning as a "bridge" that simply links two cultural entities. Instead, I argue that the poets' insistence on the personal voice and their own particular transcultural perspectives, without intending to represent or teach about "Asian" culture or history, does much more than serve as a "bridge" or a cultural "ambassador." Ali's writing about Kashmir does not merely depict his home to a Western audience but rather reveals a cosmopolitan view of the world and poetic art, which is fundamentally based on drawing connections between the colonization of his homeland and its aftermath, on the one hand, and many other places subjected to similar experiences, on the other. Inspired by Japanese literature, Hahn's poetry, by the same token, is not meant to bring classical Japanese texts into the horizon of her American readership. Her ultimate task is not that of a translator. Rather, she explores the possibility of writing in unmediated Japanese forms in order to find a liberating, intimate feminist voice of her own. In what Eleanor Ty calls a kind of writing that goes "beyond autoethnography," Wah investigates the fundamental meaning of "ethnic" poetics through a style based on a deconstructionist view of language. Exploring the Chinese-ness as well as mixed race identity of his father and of himself, Wah shows how the temporal and spatial travel between the past and present of Canada, the United States, and China presents the possibility of heterogenizing rather than connecting the

different cultures. In what is usually taken to be “autobiographical” writing, Cha engages Korean history as it is animated by the history of Japan-Korea relations and United States-Korea relations as they inform her family’s experience. Her particular historiography is by no means a “bridge” between East Asia and America in the detached fashion of “diplomats of cultural traffic” (Park 22). Instead, through painful personal memory her work exposes and confronts Korean American women’s predicament, their double marginalization as ethnic minority in a white-dominated social environment and as women in male-dominated traditional gender relations. Thus, what these poets’ writings foreground is how border-crossing as a practice enables the reader to see the trauma caused by conflicts between nations and cultures, which Orientalism’s predictably exoticizing narratives obscure. Demonstrating the inseparability of ethnic and exilic discourses and the creative possibilities that minority or marginalized positioning can bring, these poets call attention to the international, intercultural relations that are much more complicated than the authors of “American Orientalism” suggests.

Moreover, like Park, I pay attention to the poets’ relationship to modernist tradition as well. Hahn’s and Cha’s adoption and rewriting of Poundian imagism and epic practice occupy important parts of my chapters devoted to their work. However, these are only part of the rich intertextual connections that I examine. These poets actively engage with not only poetic and artistic traditions of Asia and America but also those of Europe. Hahn’s work, while persistently referring to Japanese literary texts and rewriting Poundian images, is also inspired by French feminist writings, especially the French feminist discourse *l’écriture féminine*. Cha’s work, in different ways, invokes French theories as well. If Park’s use of intertextual, comparative reading is more often about

hearing the “echo” between American Orientalist writings and Asian American poetics, my argument is built upon conscious references and more concrete intertextual connections. Ali’s direct references to poets such as W. B. Yeats and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the impact of James Merrill’s poetry on his writing all demonstrate important “points of contact” (Park’s words), through which one can understand his complex relationship to canonical poetry in English. Wah’s conscious imitation of and learning from Charles Olson, his affinity to the Language poetry, and his allusions to East Asian aesthetics present another example of the necessity to read Asian North American poetry from a transcultural perspective.

Close Reading in Multiple Theoretical Frames

To study the poets’ forms as well as themes largely through close reading, this project draws upon a number of theoretical discourses in literary and cultural criticism. For Ali, I review the history of the concept “cosmopolitanism” from Immanuel Kant to contemporary theorists including Kwame Anthony Appiah, Walter D. Mignolo, and Homi Bhabha. Ali foregrounds the tension and interaction between the local and the global in his poetry with thematic connections to canonical English poets and post-World War II American travel poetry and incorporation of various conventional verse forms ranging from canzone and terza rima to the ghazal. His poetics exemplifies a “compassionate cosmopolitanism,” which, with an affective dimension reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, connects disparate places and implicitly critiques the imperialist power behind colonization and contemporary warfare.

Like Ali, Hahn is very interested in transferring poetic forms from other cultural traditions into poetry in English. She begins with conventional free verse but writes in an increasingly innovative style that blurs the boundary between poetry and prose. Invoking theories of translation studies by Walter Benjamin and Gayatri Spivak and the feminist criticism of *l'écriture féminine*, my second chapter focuses on the trope of translation in Hahn's poetry and studies how she invites a comparative feminist reading of women writers in East Asian tradition and contemporary Euro-American feminist voices. I argue that her poetry emancipates the possibilities of "translating" without marginalizing or exoticizing texts from other cultures and thus develops a feminist poetic voice that troubles the boundaries between self and other.

The third chapter is centered on Wah's performative poetics, which can be considered avant-garde on more than one level. Fragmenting and restructuring words and sentences, Wah disrupts the usual modes of reading and diverts the attention from what the words and sentences "mean" to how language operates. Like Hahn, he uses forms from Japanese tradition and often mixes prose and poetry. To read his intertextual writing, this chapter draws upon Jacques Derrida's and Judith Butler's theorization of the performative and examines his poetics of oppositional performativity, which is based on a deconstructive approach to language. I focus on his avant-garde stylistics as a point of entry to his unique redefinition of notions of "hybridity" and "ethnic writing." Wah's poetics foregrounds the materiality of language and thus urges the reader to interrogate the ways in which language functions in dominant racial discourses.

Questions of ethnicity and gender are inextricably woven in Cha's work, as they are in Hahn's, though Cha's feminist concerns are more revealed in her intermedia work

inspired by feminist film theory and practice of the 1960s and 1970s. Cha's writing on exilic Korean American women calls for a review of the male-centered theorization of exile by scholars such as Edward Said, which I refer to in reading Ali and Wah. In what I call a "visual poetry" that includes poetic writings, artist books, installation art, and film and video works, Cha's highly adventurous integration of multiple languages and media forces the reader to consider the significance of form in a text's critiquing of the power behind colonialism, gender hierarchy, and the trauma that modern warfare imposes on individuals.

Through the multiple theoretical frames, my project seeks to elucidate the complex topography of Asian North American poetry, with its varied thematic concerns, formal strategies, and ways of participating in the contemporary discourses of ethnicity, exile, as well as the power of the nation-state. Reading the poets through diverse theoretical lenses, this study also intends to demonstrate the boundless possibilities of poetic writing across linguistic, national, and cultural borders. The poets engage in various kinds of aesthetic experimentation with language and other artistic media and, more importantly, show how poetry can inspire a rethinking of the complicated international and intercultural relations that define the intersectional existence of ethnic minorities.

Chapter One

The Home and the World: The Cosmopolitanism of Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry⁶

For Agha Shahid Ali, based in the United States but of South Asian origin, “home” and “world” are two major concerns. In the prologue to his collection The Country Without a Post Office (1997), Ali quotes the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam as his beginning, “We shall meet again, in Petersburg / as though we had buried the sun there” (15). Mandelstam wrote these lines in 1920, amidst a gloomy transformation of Petersburg: the government had just moved to Moscow, and more than half of the population fled the city devastated by the revolutions and the ensuing Russian Civil War (Volkov 211-212).⁷ Mandelstam took frequent trips away from the city at the time (Brown x).⁸ In these lines, Petersburg, his birth place, is poeticized nostalgically as the place where light and hope, though hidden, may be retrieved. Ali finds a parallel here to his own thinking about Kashmir, the place of his birth and the home he leaves behind. He writes mimetically: “We shall meet again, in Srinagar.” Then he goes on to show how his poet-speaker reads himself through his own reading of Mandelstam:

He reinvents Petersburg (I, Srinagar), an imaginary homeland, filling it, closing it, shutting himself (myself) in it. For there is the blessed word with no meaning, there are flowers that will never die, roses that will

⁶ “The Home and the World” is taken from the title of a novel by Rabindranath Tagore.

⁷ The city’s original name was St. Petersburg, also called Petersburg, and was later changed into Petrograd in 1914 and to Leningrad in 1924 (Volkov 337). Mandelstam kept referring to it by its original name. I follow the poet’s use here.

⁸ Mandelstam’s later exile within his own country was a tragic story in the modern Russian literary history. Due to a poem he wrote, which sarcastically described the fearful climate under Stalin, Mandelstam was exiled in 1933 first to a small town in the Urals, the mountainous area in Western Russia, and then to the provincial town Voronezh. He was forbidden to return to Moscow and St. Petersburg until 1938, and shortly afterwards he was arrested again and died in a correction camp (Brown xii-xiv).

never fall, a night in which Mandelstam is not afraid and needs no pass.
(15)

Through the explicit use of parentheses, Ali's speaker inserts himself into a reading of Mandelstam's poem. Mandelstam's lines, not merely a source of inspiration, work as a mirror here in which Ali's speaker sees his relation to his own "homeland," Srinagar, the capital of the India-administered part of Kashmir, a region that has been suffering from continuous war and conflict.⁹ He "reinvents" the city as "an imaginary homeland" just as Mandelstam does with Petersburg. Invoking Salman Rushdie's term, Ali calls attention to how the representation of home from afar is always mediated by memory and imagination. The speaker's relation to Kashmir, then, is complicated by this mediation and seems to involve more than an exilic nostalgia: for him, the "homeland" as an ideally safe and beautiful asylum is not the actual geographical location but rather its representation in writing. An extension of his reading experience, writing becomes the exile's refuge, making possible cross-cultural encounters and identification. If, as Rushdie has argued in "Imaginary Homelands" (13), writers must make a political choice when deciding how to write of home from a distance, what is Ali's politics behind his representation of Kashmir? What is the significance of his reference to texts from different cultural traditions and across time? How do we read his identification with other writers in spite of the different historical and political contexts in which they are situated?

In this chapter, I will examine how Ali's poems function in a transcultural mode by weaving different locations, histories, and literary traditions into a complex web with intertextual references to a variety of canonical poets, including W. B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. While critics

⁹ For the history of Kashmir, see Rai.

like Lawrence Needham and Jeannie Chiu have discussed Ali's aestheticizing of exilic nostalgia, melancholy, and loss centered on Kashmir, my reading looks at how Ali draws connection between the home and the world rather than focusing on his exilic writing as a Kashmiri in the United States. I argue that he writes a poetry of "compassionate cosmopolitanism," which, rooted in his multi-cultural heritage, not only foregrounds an ethics of compassion across national and cultural boundaries but also implies a critique of colonial and neo-colonial power. Drawing upon historical as well as recent theorizations of "cosmopolitanism," I first read Ali's depiction of Kashmir, the home, through comparisons to other geographical sites in The Country without a Post Office. I then turn to the world in Ali's poems of travel in two other books, A Nostalgist's Map of America (1991) and Rooms Are Never Finished (2001) to examine how he extends concerns about his home to other marginalized cultures. His cosmopolitanism is especially meaningful if read in the context of postwar American travel poetry, for it extends into new territories questions raised by such poets as Elizabeth Bishop and Carolyn Forché and enables reconsideration of the relationship between "home" and "foreign," between regional issues and global concerns.

Compassionate Cosmopolitanism

The word "cosmopolitan" has its origin in Greek, where it means "citizen of the world." Theorists of cosmopolitanism have traced the concept to the Stoics and have noted its development in Kant's political writings, particularly his project on "perpetual peace," which argues that international commerce forms a basis for "a cosmopolis or world federation" that fosters universally communicable values and pleasures"

(paraphrased in Cheah 290-291). Studies of the concept's significance in the contemporary world — a world increasingly characterized by mobility across borders — have found Kant's idea problematic for its Eurocentric perspective.¹⁰ A central problem remains as to how to define the meanings of home, national and cultural belonging, and local allegiances considering both the history of colonialism and the current realities of "globalization." Scholars like Pheng Cheah have examined the complicated relationship between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, but a question remains: if in the history of ideas cosmopolitanism has not always been opposed to nationalism, is the search for home or place-based imaginations of belonging necessarily in opposition to the spirit of world citizenship? Kwame Anthony Appiah sees in cosmopolitanism the possibility of multiple attachments and multiple loyalties for a transnational traveler. As James Clifford explains, Appiah raises the possibility of "living in and contributing to one part of the world while keeping meaningful attachments with another" ("Mixed Feelings" 362). Yet one wonders how this cosmopolitan ideal would address problems of unequal power relations between different parts of the world or within the homeland itself: how would the consequent politics of this inequality affect one's sense of "attachment" and one's conception of the home and the world?

Others have taken this question into account. Walter D. Mignolo theorizes a "critical cosmopolitanism" by reconsidering cosmopolitanism "from the perspective of coloniality [...] and within the frame of the modern/colonial world" (159). Seeing coloniality as "the hidden face of modernity," this reconsideration points out the Eurocentrism and the imperialist origin of the traditional Kantian conception of cosmopolitanism and proposes instead "globalization from below." Mignolo insists on developing a "subaltern

¹⁰ See Bhabha, Cheah, Robbins, and Mignolo, for summaries and analysis of Kant's idea.

perspective” from which to establish a vision of “diversality,” or “a pluricentric world built on the ruins of ancient, non-Western cultures and civilizations” (158, 183). Homi Bhabha in theorizing a “vernacular cosmopolitanism” expresses a similar concern with the underprivileged and the marginal in the current world, which in his view is very much marked by the aftermath of colonialism and a neocolonial order. His “vernacular cosmopolitanism” echoes Mignolo’s theory by proposing a “minoritarian perspective,” from which to “measure global progress” and to oppose the trend of globalization that results in “the reproduction of dual, unequal economies” (Location of Culture xvi, “Forward: Framing Fanon” xii).¹¹

As in Mignolo and Bhabha’s theories, Ali’s poetry demonstrates a criticism of colonialism and neocolonialism from below. Yet with lines full of intertextual and intercultural connections like “We shall meet again, in Srinagar” (Nostalgist 15), his works contain something more than merely a “critical cosmopolitanism.” The connection between the home and the world in his view seems to lie in the affective dimension of his poetry. In a more detailed exploration of the history of “cosmopolitanism,” one can find that before Kant, philosophers of the French Enlightenment had also explored the idea.¹² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, in his thinking about the individual and society, refers to the concept when he discusses “commiseration,” a virtue that “no longer dwells in any but a few great cosmopolitan souls, who surmount the imaginary barriers that separate peoples and who, following the example of the sovereign Being who created

¹¹ Bhabha cites the economist Joseph Stiglitz’s notion of “dual economy,” which refers to the uneven and unequal economic conditions often in developing countries as a result of foreign investments. See Stiglitz 71-72.

¹² The scholars of literature and cultural studies — see the above mentioned theorists — somehow all leave out Rousseau, but philosophers’ discussion of “cosmopolitanism” often treat him seriously. See Honig, Knippenberg, and Ypi.

them, include the whole human race in their benevolence” (quoted in Honig 14).

Rousseau’s idea of “commiseration” — the “natural” goodness of pity or compassion that he thought the modern world had almost completely lost — may shed light on my reading of Ali. For his poems show a compassionate cosmopolitanism in exploring the meanings of belonging and the relationship of the home to the world. He is deeply concerned not only with his formerly colonized home — the Indian subcontinent, particularly the region of Kashmir — but also with other cultures subject to the aftermath of colonialism and the contemporary neocolonial order. His position in the United States both provides distance for and complicates his looking at the colonial past that still looms over South Asia. Although from the perspective of a transnational traveler with the privilege attained by an established academic career in the United States, his poems, with their profoundly affective power, compel the reader to review the history of colonialism and the politics of Empire in various locations around the world.

The Politics of Home, The Politics of Witness

In an essay on Amitav Ghosh’s novel The Shadow Lines, Shameem Black argues that the study of cosmopolitanism should be “more committed to recognize ‘the world’ through the home” (46). He shows how Ghosh presents “the home and the world as collaborative rather than competing realities” with a cosmopolitan sensibility revealed through a concern for the domestic world (46). Home in Ali’s works often takes the form of a remembered or imagined homeland, “the country without a post office” that is not a recognized nation and has been continuously suffering warfare. Instead of being “collaborative” or “competing” with the world, the home in his poems epitomizes the

world's traumatic history and ongoing present. In an essay in memory of Ali, Amitav Ghosh describes the poet's view of Kashmir this way:

Anguished as he was about Kashmir's destiny, Shahid resolutely refused to embrace the role of victim that could so easily have been his. [...] The truth is that Shahid's gaze was not political in the sense of being framed in terms of policy and solutions. In the broadest sense, his vision tended always toward the inclusive and ecumenical.

What exactly is this vision? If Appiah's "rooted cosmopolitanism" emphasizes the possibility of multiple loyalties, Ali's compassionate cosmopolitanism in The Country Without a Post Office emphasizes the possibility and the importance of multiple concerns. Often reminiscent of Carolyn Forché's poetry of witness, the poems's concern for a war-torn home extends to many other locations around the world. The compassionate cosmopolitanism of these poems, as shown in the analysis below, reveals an effort to resist the prejudice and hostility against Muslims and Islamic culture.

Following Mandelstam's words, the poems in The Country Without a Post Office delineate Kashmir as a devastated land and, more importantly, a place linked to other locations also struggling for peace and hope. A region in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, where the majority of the population has been Muslim, Kashmir was ruled by the Afghan Empire and Sikh armies before Britain's colonization of the subcontinent in the mid-nineteenth century. Since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, Kashmir has become not only a place of frequent religious and ethnic conflict, but a hot spot in territorial disputes among India, Pakistan, and China.¹³ The Poem "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight," the second in the collection, records atrocities taking place in the intensified confrontation between Islamic insurgents and Indian armed forces in the

¹³ For the history of Kashmir, see Rai.

India-controlled Kashmir region in the early 1990s.¹⁴ The poem invites an intertextual reading by taking as its epigraph the lines of Yeats's famous "Easter, 1916": "Now and in time to be, / Wherever green is worn, ... / A terrible beauty is born" (qtd. in 24). Yeats's response to Ireland's Easter Rising in 1916 reveals his deep horror and grief at the rebellion's failure to gain national independence from British rule in spite of many sacrifices. Remarkably foregrounding the significance of the Rising, the poem nevertheless reveals Yeats's deep ambivalence about the sacrifices and the value of the rebellion for the Irish cause. As David Lloyd and Marjorie Perloff have commented, the poem derives its power from the poet's profound anxiety about the nation's future and a poet's role in it, an anxiety clearly shown in his deeply ambiguous language (metaphors such as "terrible beauty").¹⁵

Ali, lamenting the destruction of Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, ponders the future of his homeland as well. "One must wear jeweled ice in dry plains / to will the distant mountains to glass." Thus begins Ali's poem (24). These lines recall the opening of Wallace Stevens' 1923 poem "The Snow Man": "One must have a mind of winter / To regard the grost and the boughs." They set up a freezing, wintry atmosphere that will prevail throughout the entire poem. Seeing soldiers remove sacred statues from temples, the speaker's question "Who will protect us if you leave?" shows the focus of the poem and voices a deep concern about the future of Muslims in Kashmir. While Yeats commemorates the deaths of Rebellion leaders in his poem, here Ali laments the death of Rizwan, the Guardian of the Gates of Paradise,¹⁶ who whispers painfully, "I have been

¹⁴ See Ali's explanation in the interview with Deborah Klenotic.

¹⁵ See Lloyd 70, and Perloff "'Easter 1916': Yeats's First World War Poem" 231-241.

¹⁶ Later in the collection, in the poem "Dear Shahid" it was mentioned that Rizwan, the Guardian of the Gates of Paradise, was killed. I take the Rizwan here to be the same person.

cold a long, long time,” echoing Stevens’ line “One must... / ... And have been cold a long time / To behold the junipers shagged with ice.” Ali’s lines which allude to Stevens brings to mind a sense of absolute desolation. In an imagined journey through Srinagar, “the city from where no news can come,” the speaker witnesses the atrocities together with the now-deceased Rizwan:

“Don’t tell my father I have died,” he says,
and I follow him through blood on the road
and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners
left behind, as they ran from the funeral,
victims of the firing. From the windows we hear
grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall
on us, like ash. ...

...

Kashmir is burning: (25)

The long sentences that run on for several lines here, with a halting effect due to numerous modifications, give the exact feeling of bumping over the war-torn terrain. While realistic details such as “blood” and “shoes” are presented with a documentary precision, the image of the falling, ash-like snow contributes to the more melancholy and elegiac sensibility of the scene, as war brings death—represented by “ash”—everywhere. More striking is the last line of the stanza. Following a series of long lines, the brevity of this line suddenly changes the rhythm with its structural simplicity: “Kashmir is burning.” The cold, matter-of-fact statement exposes the reader with stunning abruptness to a reality that is almost too cruel to face. If Yeats gives a struggled response to the rebellion, then Ali in his poem is also anxious about the poet’s role in the face of a troubled homeland. “I won’t tell your father you have died, Rizwan, / but where has your shadow fallen / [...] / On Himalayan snow?” He asks in vain and can only conclude with a prayer for peace and hope: “I’ve tied a knot / with green thread at Shah Hamdan”(26).

Jahan Ramazani and Carolyn Forché have both commented that Ali writes in the tradition of Yeats.¹⁷ Indeed, both Yeats and Ali respond to political reality through writing and their complicated relationship with the very language in which they compose. Yeats, as Ramazani argues, reveals a postcoloniality that is characterized by “a politics of in-betweenness,” a politics more of “hybridity” than of “baldly political... anticolonialism, nationalism, and Third-Worldism” (36). For Yeats shows an ambivalent feeling about the English language and literary tradition: nationalist in his ideal of Ireland’s independence, he nevertheless proposes a new Irish literature in English, “We will do more to de-Anglicise Ireland [with English] than by longing to recall the Gaelic tongue and the snows of yester year” (quoted in Ramazani 39). Yeats continued this effort of writing new literature in English as he moved back to Dublin and worked as a senator in the new government after the partition of Ireland. Educated in English and developing a deep love for the English language, Ali is aware of his postcoloniality as well (“A Privileged Site” 54). If poetry writing, as Forché’s poetics of witness has shown, can be a way to fight against forgetting, Ali’s poem “I See Kashmir,” with its intertextual references, reminds the reader that from the Ireland of the early twentieth century to Kashmir of the late twentieth century, political and religious wars have never ended on the earth. More specifically, both Ireland and Kashmir have to deal with the legacy of British colonialism, though Ireland is a First World Country “with a Third World memory” (Ramazani 32). Ali’s poem brings to mind the history of anti-colonial struggles and the problems of the current post-colonial reality. Western powers have used the strategy of “divide and conquer” over and over again. From Ireland to the Indian subcontinent, where Kashmir is painfully wedged in the perilous space between two nuclear powers, the partition of

¹⁷ See Ramazani, 38, and the blurb Forché writes for Ali’s [Nostalgist’s Map of America](#).

territory has caused war and catastrophe among the most traumatic in human history and has made visible the terrible aftermath of colonialism. The poem “I See Kashmir” is composed of fifteen-line segments, each formed by breaking one line of a sonnet right in the middle into two and thus breaking the “sonnet” into two stanzas. Consequently, each “sonnet” unit of this poem visually represents “partition” through a verbal rupture. Rajini Srikanth in her book on South Asian American literature has briefly discussed Ali’s effort to “ensure that Kashmir [...] not become disconnected from the lives of his readers” (69). She shows how Ali’s Kashmir is often juxtaposed with other places in the world, but she has not attended to how the locations are exactly “connected” in the poems. In “I See Kashmir,” the reference to Yeats’s writing on Ireland’s struggle for independence points to a historical and a transcultural point of view, from which “Kashmir” does not merely refer to the geographic location *per se* but represents a site, like so many other sites, where the struggle in the aftermath of colonialism goes on.

Yeats always believed in the power of language and literature to reclaim national history and tradition. He believed in the significance of his own participation in the effort of that reclaiming. Ali, while writing about the situation in Kashmir, seems more aware of the problematics of his position as both a voice speaking for his home Kashmir and a self-exiled outsider to its catastrophic wars. Leading readers to witness with him the atrocities in Kashmir, The Country without a Post Office moves on to unfold Kashmir’s stories from perspectives other than the poet-speaker’s. The prose poem “Dear Shahid,” shortly after “I See Kashmir,” assumes the voice of someone remaining in Kashmir who writes to the poet about the devastation there. The written letter is an important form in this book, whose central theme is communication, or lack thereof, in war-time Kashmir.

Throughout the prose poem, the poet as the addressee is an absent figure, difficult to reach and apparently unable to provide immediate help. The writer of the letter speaks in a deeply melancholic voice, in short fragmentary sentences and desperate questions:

I am writing to you from your far-off country. Far even from us who live here. Where you no longer are. [...]

[...]

Today I went to the post office. Across the river. Bags and bags—hundreds of canvas bags—all undelivered mail. [...]

Things here are as usual though we always talk about you. Will you come soon? Waiting for you is like waiting for spring. (43)

Jacques Derrida writes about the letter as a performative written text, which anticipates, speaks to, and can even “produce” its absent, “mute,” and “hollowed-out” addressee. He observes the psychology that reading a letter may entail: anyone who reads a letter may identify himself or herself as the intended recipient (6). Ali’s letter, although clearly addressed to himself, nevertheless positions himself, the addressee, as vague, “mute,” and powerless. Reading the prose poem, one cannot help but find oneself holding the same sense of guilt as the poet-addressee: being far away, what help can we offer? The following poem, “A Pastoral,” quotes another letter from Kashmir addressed to the poet. It more explicitly questions the poet who lives in a peaceful and therefore unconcerned, indifferent Western world: “Why aren’t you here? Where are you? Come back. // Is history deaf there, across the oceans?” (45) The reader, together with the poet-addressee, would not fail to find behind the breathless succession of short questions the urgency of the situation at home and makes any answer seem too easy and inadequate. Through these letters, Ali exposes his own predicament as a poet outside the ongoing tragedies of his homeland: what can he do except write from a distance? And what is the significance of this poetry? As the book moves on, Ali continues to grapple with this problem. The

answers become increasingly clear as he makes more connections between Kashmir and the world.

Written in response to the 1995 destruction by fire of one of Kashmir's most important Muslim shrines, the title poem, "The Country Without a Post Office," again uses the epistle as the central form which leads the collection to its emotional climax. Away from the world's attention, Kashmir in this poem is a destroyed place where "each post office is boarded up," the letters rendered "dead," unable to reach their intended addressees (49). Surprisingly, the poem with its local focus reveals a rather global dimension. Through a reference to a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, the poem links Catholic faith in God and Islamic belief. Taken from one of Hopkins's breviary sonnets, "I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark," the lines "...And my lament / Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! Away" not only appear as the epigraph but are also adapted in the last part of Ali's poem (qtd. in 48). Hopkins was a Catholic convert and Jesuit priest. His lines paint an image of spiritual darkness as the speaker waits desperately for answers from God. The unanswered prayers are compared to "dead letters," which Ali selects as the key image for the poem. Ali's speaker, here, is a poet — probably himself — who returns to Kashmir in a painful and futile search for the keeper of a destroyed minaret. The poem laments the dead muezzin, the crier who would call the faithful to prayers five times a day, and the keeper of the minaret, who only appears in the form of a voice desperately calling to the world outside Kashmir. The voice of Hopkins, a century-old Catholic voice praying to the Western, Christian God, provides the poet with a metaphor and a tone extremely appropriate for this different

situation where the poet takes the place of the dead muezzin and calls the faithful who are absent due to war:

I light lamps, send my answers, Calls to Prayer
to deaf worlds across continents. And my lament
is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
to this world whose end was near, always near
My words go out in huge packages of rain,
go there, to addresses, across the oceans. (51)

The poet's grief over the loss of a Muslim shrine, a deeply religious loss, and his longing for answers to his lament echo the agony and despair Hopkins' speaker feels over an apparently failed communication with God. Invoking Hopkins' lines, Ali's poem makes possible sympathy between the two speakers across time and religious difference, in spite of significant historical differences. If the poet figure in earlier poems "Dear Shahid" and "A Pastoral" suggests questions about what he can do, the poet in this poem, although in profound sadness, is more certain about the meaning of his writing. The power of words lies in the possibility of their reaching out "across continents" and "across the oceans" — their power of "dissemination," to use Homi Bhabha's term. Intertextuality enables a reconsideration across cultural and religious divides. Ali's poem, in this way, actually "light[s] lamps" for a better perception of both his home and the world.¹⁸

With intertextual references to re-map Kashmir in his cosmopolitan view of the world, Ali also links his home to other places struggling in contemporary war such as Chechnya and Sarajevo. One of the sections of the book opens with Armenian activist Elena Bonner's open letter to Boris Yeltsin on Chechnya as one of its epigraphs: "No

¹⁸ In his collection of ghazal Call Me Ishmael Tonight, posthumously published in 2003, Ali again writes in response to Hopkins in a ghazal titled "In" (66-67). There he links thoughts of his deteriorating health to Hopkins' poem "The Candle Indoors," in which Hopkins writes about a candle light he passes by on a lonely night journey. Hopkins, the Catholic poet, becomes someone Ali yearns to "bring in," to converse with, while facing his own mortality. Moreover, Ali's conscious linking of different religious culture is even shown in the title "Call Me Ishmael Tonight." As Ramazani has commented in A Transnational Poetics, it clearly shows "an intercultural node in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam intersect" (105).

idea, even an idea as close to many Russians as the indivisibility of Russia, can justify a war against a whole people” (41). The words here privilege a humanistic view of people and ethnicity over nationalism, which echoes many other poems in the book. If the Ireland-Kashmir connection in the poem “I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight” speaks against the imperial power with a historic view, the reference to places like Chechnya attends to the contemporary. Ali not only turns to English poetic tradition for intertextual inspiration but also draws on what is going on at the same moment in history such as this for his text, leading readers to see how relevant poetry can be to the contemporary world.

The poem “The Correspondent” situates its cosmopolitan spirit amidst the disturbance of in Sarajevo. The title character is a journalist passionate about his work, covering war in countries written in his schedule. He will not let war change his working plan for all the difficulty listed by the speaker, a native Kashmiri. The footage about Sarajevo the correspondent carries to Kashmir occupies the central position in the poem:

“I’ve just come—with videos—from Sarajevo.”

His footage is priceless with sympathy,
close-ups in slow motion: from bombed sites
to the dissolve of mosques in colonnades.
Then, wheelchairs on a ramp,
burning. He fast-forwards: the scene:
the sun: a man in formal wear: he plays
on the sidewalk his unaccompanied cello,

the hour tuned, dusk-slowed, to Albinoni,
only the *Adagio* as funeral rites (54)

The passage describes an audio-visual text. On the one hand, it is a passage of especially frequent ruptures within lines. The numerous punctuation marks and the list of images break the lines into small parts. The resulting fragmented lines echo the broken,

devastated scene they represent. On the other, with the ironic phrase “priceless with sympathy” and the intentionally clichéd description of “close-ups in slow motion,” this is a generic sentimentalized picture of Sarajevo, as commonly seen in mainstream media of the Western world during the Bosnian war in the early 1990s. In contrast, Kashmir, the place of the correspondent’s next assignment, does not receive a clear-cut description in the poem. In contrast to the specificity of the images of “mosques,” “wheelchairs,” “a man in formal wear,” “unaccompanied cello,” and Albinoni’s *Adagio* in the description of Sarajevo, Kashmir is kept in the dark backdrop throughout the poem. Repetitive use of such words from the Kashmiri speaker’s perspective as “my dark,” “my shadow,” “dim,” “haze,” “faltering light” leave the scene of war frustratingly unclear, heightening a disturbing sense of insecurity. Details such as the “soundtrack of exploding grenades” and “convoys in the mountains,” though just mentioned in passing, seem simultaneously frighteningly real and disturbingly distant. The actual sounds of war here create a sharp contrast to the aestheticized “Adagio” accompanying the Sarajevo footage.

If the Sarajevo scene not only presents what war can bring but also the problematics of how war is represented in media, the darkness of Kashmir throughout the poem shows the poet’s concern about the terror of war there and its lack of representation. Reading the contrast, one thinks of the high-profile coverage of the Bosnian War, due to Western powers’ involvement in the politics of Bosnia, as opposed to the absence of the representation of the Kashmiri situation in the Western media. Sri Lankan American author Indran Amirthanayagam, in a poem about the civil war of Sri Lanka, has criticized American media’s ignorance of the world beyond its shores (Srikanth 9). Ali’s poem does something similar, but in a more subtle way. Representing Kashmir with a contrast that

intensifies its poignancy, he calls attention to the often overlooked. The poem “A Pastoral,” quoted above, echoes this calling, though more straightforwardly: “...Where are you? Come back. / Is history deaf there, across the oceans?” (45). Like the correspondent he writes about, Ali unveils the suffering of this part of the world to his Western readers, who may otherwise never think about the strife in South Asia. Kashmir, for the majority of Western readers, may only be a remote and mystical place, seldom encountered in literary or cultural scenes. On one of the rare occasions it does appear, in the beginning of Salman Rushdie’s famous novel Midnight’s Children, Kashmir, before partition, was characterized by a mythical, almost Edenic harmony. As Patrick Colm Hogan has noted, Rushdie soon moves away from Kashmir and later suggests a tragic future for Kashmir in his book, yet the real situation is even more bleak and complicated than Rushdie suggests (539). Since partition, Kashmir has been transformed into a place of tensions and catastrophes:

This conflict between an indigenous tradition of practical identity that tends toward harmonization and an alien system of categorical identities that aligns religious affiliation with nationhood in sets of rigid antitheses—Muslim against Hindu, Pakistan against India—this conflict is no doubt one important cause of the pain and cruelty that have been so evident in Kashmir in recent years. (Hogan 539)

Though he acknowledges Kashmir’s quiet past in several of his poems, Ali puts more emphasis on Kashmir’s present in The Country Without a Post Office. He captures moments from these recent antitheses and represents them in his poems. If Rushdie makes visible a harmonious Kashmir that belongs to the past, Ali’s Kashmir poems

reveal the current reality, marked by blood, despair, and darkness caused by complicated inter-national and inter-religious politics.¹⁹

In “The Correspondent,” Bosnia—the counterpoint to Kashmir on one level—is a place with both a similar history and present. Ethnic and religious conflicts in Bosnia, like in the Indian subcontinent, have a long history.²⁰ The image of the destroyed “mosques in colonnades” in the Sarajevo passage is crucial to understanding the entire poem: war against Muslims is the major problem in both places. Destruction in one context easily elicits memories of similar disasters in the other. It is also worth noting that the poem progresses through an evolving conversation between the speaker and the title character. The exchange of words between the two characters, one a Kashmiri and the other one presumably from the West, points to a possibility of understanding and compassion across national borders. Instead of making it the sole focus, Ali, in drawing attention to the often-ignored Kashmir, compares it to another devastated land. Confronted by the turmoil in both places, the reader is pushed to the position of the main character, the correspondent, who has left war in one place only to find himself trapped in that of another.

The immediacy and compelling visuality of Ali’s Kashmir poems evoke Carolyn Forché’s notion of a “poetry of witness” which is highly critical of imperialist and (neo-) colonial power. Forché is best known for The Country Between Us (1981), a collection of poems she wrote as a journalist in Central America. As the correspondent in Ali’s poem tries to do, she records what she sees with sympathetic identification, providing precise depictions of the suffering that results from Central America’s political and military

¹⁹ Ali sees Rushdie as a pioneering figure that initiates a new literary language—“subcontinental English”—by combining “the subcontinent’s myths and legends and history with English (“Privileged Site” 55).

²⁰ For the historical origins of the ethnic conflicts in Bosnia, see Malcolm.

turmoil, of which the horrific imagery in her prose poem “The Colonel” is the most unforgettable example. She is aware that witness writing faces such potential dangers as oversimplification and poeticizing terror but nevertheless believes in the necessity of getting involved as a poet.²¹ In the introduction to Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness, an anthology she edited in 1993, she refuses to categorize poetry according to “the personal” and “the political” but locates it somewhere in between — a space called “the social” between “the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal” (31). However, there are fundamental problems with these categories. Her own work has shown how it is often impossible to separate the “personal” from the “political.” Always recording what she sees from her own point of view, she gives voice to the otherwise mostly silenced victims of the catastrophes caused by America’s involvement in El Salvador’s civil war.

Forché includes Osip Mandelstam in her anthology of witness poetry; following inspiration from Mandelstam, how personal and/or political are Ali’s Kashmir poems? His poems witness and also expose American readers to the suffering in the remote landscapes they might usually ignore, but more than Forché, he believes in the inseparability of the personal and the political. In the preface to his translation of Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s poems, The Rebel’s Silhouette, Ali notes, “In Faiz’s poetry, suffering is seldom, perhaps never, private [...]. Though deeply personal, it is almost never isolated from a sense of history and injustice” (n.pag.). The same thing can be said about his own work. As a Kashmiri native, his witnessing departs from melancholic, elegiac personal feelings and develops into a compassionate cosmopolitan view of the world. Kashmir in this witnessing becomes a point connected to other locations in the world map both

²¹ Meghan O’Rourke talks about Forché’s idea of witness in a review of Blue Hour.

historically and in the present. The rather “personal” homesickness, nostalgia, and lament for the death of Kashmiri natives are made intensely political, as the depicted Kashmir inevitably leads to a critique of power. Whereas Forché’s El Salvador poems appear at a time when Americans began to think about the United States government’s complicity in Central America’s political and military turmoil, Ali’s The Country Without a Post Office, published in 1997, provided a direct response to the dominating Islamophobic ideology in the West led by Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” model. Considering events such as the notorious rush to blame Muslim terrorists following the Oklahoma City bombing and the post-9/11 foreign policy of the United States that has been marked by a hostility toward Islamic ideology, the connection Ali draws between Islamic Kashmir and other parts of the world seems especially resonant today. His poems represent Muslims and their culture as vulnerable to war like any other people on earth.²² As demonstrated in the title poem of the collection, “The Country Without a Post Office,” sympathy toward different religions is made visible by Ali’s linking Christian and Muslim religious emotions together. After all, his poems, although apparently focused on the sufferings of Kashmir, are meant for a wider audience “across continents” and “across oceans.” For as demonstrated in the collection as a whole, Kashmir, his original home, is a vantage point from which Ali sees the world that is in desperate need of cosmopolitan compassion. As shown in the young man Rizwan he elegizes—who repeats touchingly over and over, “Don’t tell my father I have died” and sheds blood like “sheer rubies on Himalayan snow”—what Ali writes about emerges from specific political and religious conflicts; yet the misery depicted in his Kashmir poems transcends the specificity and

²² In fact, Ali had always actively resisted prejudice against Islamic culture. He was one of the writers who, signing the letter to the New York Times editor in 1989 to protest the *fatwa* against Rushdie, clarified that the campaign against Rushdie was actually “antithetical to the Islamic traditions of learning and tolerance.”

connects to the suppression of others, from the East and the West, in history and the present.

The Traveling Poet, Traveling Forms

While Ali's Kashmir poems focus on the complex rootedness of home, his other poems evoke the routed-ness of traveling. Travel always played a significant role in Ali's life. As Lawrence Needham has noted, "Being in-between comes naturally to Ali" (63). Growing up in Kashmir, Ali lived in America as a child and studied in New Delhi before he traveled again to the United States as a graduate student (Islam 263). He then settled in America as a poet and professor and taught in several universities across the country. In "A Tribute to Agha Shahid Ali: 'After You'," Christopher Merrill recalls that Ali claimed he was exiled from Kashmir, from India, and from his mother tongue, Urdu. However, Ali's travel within and between America and South Asia is largely voluntary.²³ "To be in a diaspora, writing the exile's or the expatriate's poetry, is a privileged historical site, today sometimes facilely so," Ali writes in 1999 (53). In the same essay, he takes up Edward Said's differentiation of "exile" from "expatriates" or "émigrés" in "Reflections on Exile." According to Said, "exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment" (181). The homeless anguish of exile is a forced "solitude experienced outside the group," whereas "expatriates" or "émigrés" refers to those who "voluntarily live in an alien country" out of choice (Said 181; qtd in Ali "A Privileged Site" 53). Although Ali acknowledges that his identity as a poet in America is more that of an émigré in Said's sense, he would prefer to call himself an exile "for its resonance, for contrast to the near-

²³ Jeannie Chiu mentions Ali's particular kind of "exile" status in a footnote to her essay, and Maimuna Dali Islam gives more attention to the issue by explaining how with a student visa and then a work permit Ali was able to travel freely between the United States and India.

clinical ‘expatriate’ and ‘émigré’” (53). Assuming an “exile” identity for the “resonance” of the term, Ali makes a conscious choice to live and write in a poetic way. The word “resonance” invokes all of the meaning that the term “exile” evokes: the purpose of travel, the meaning of loss, and the illusion of belonging, and much more. If exile writing is usually preoccupied with “departure, nostalgia, incompleteness, rootlessness, leavetaking, and dispossession,” as Oscar Campomane has said about many Filipino-American literary works (51), Ali’s travel poems actually reflect thoughts on space and displacement as a postcolonial, transnational traveler. His collection A Nostalgist’s Map of America, for example, focuses on travel in America, but the memories and the experience of the routes written here lead to thinking beyond this land. “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror” juxtaposes the landscape of the Southwestern United States with imagined views of the military and political turmoil in South America; “Eurydice” also clearly shows his political critique in a broad sphere by rewriting the myth against the background of the Nazi horror. What kind of travel writing is this, and what new meaning does the poet give to the landscape, the traveling routes, and the locations he writes about?

Bhabha in the introduction to Location of Culture defines “unhomely” as “the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (13). Unlike a state of homelessness, his notion of the “unhomely” reinvents Freud’s concept of the uncanny in the postcolonial context. With analyses ranging from Tagore’s The Home and the World to Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady, Bhabha shows how the unhomely moment happens in the dislocation and relocation of the home and the world and refers to the condition where the distinction between home and world, between the private and the public, between the personal and the political, are compromised (13-14). Situated on

flights, at airports, or on journeys of various kinds, Ali's travel poems embrace the liminal, unhomely condition of someone who is a traveler (mostly the poet-speaker himself, though in very few cases someone else). His collections A Nostalgist's Map of America and Rooms Are Never Finished, especially, highlight an unhomely travel that constantly troubles textual, geographical and cultural boundaries and reconsiders the notion of belonging, not merely through subject matter but through style as well.

Discussing the transnational perspective of Ali and other South Asian American writers, Srikanth reminds us that American authors such as Herman Melville, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein have established a long tradition of writing about travel beyond their homeland (67-69). To contextualize Ali's poetry in the transnational writing of American authors can be helpful indeed, yet Srikanth's over-general contextualization leaves out too much, specifically how America's relationship with the rest of the world has been changing dramatically from the time of Melville to the global era, and how today's South Asian American writers may approach the relationship of America to the world from a fundamentally different perspective than the Anglo American authors of a century or more ago. Considering Ali's graduate study of English literature and his poetry writing in America since the 1970s, it is more illuminating to examine his transnational perspective in light of the trope of travel and the transnational turn in postwar American poetry.

Critics of twentieth-century American poetry have noted the importance of travel as both a thematic concern and a mode of writing and thinking, but this body of work has merely attended to mainstream poetry, of which Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Questions of

Travel” is a classic example. In Brazil, her speaker poses an endless array of questions about the meaning of both home and travel:

Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
[...]
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theatres?
[...]
*‘Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
[...] Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?’ (93-94)*

Robert von Hallberg in his influential book American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980 (1985) devotes a chapter to travel poetry, in which he reads poems such as Bishop’s in the context of the United States’ emergence as a military and economic power after World War II. He argues that travel poems of this period tend to focus on monuments and other exotic cultural sights and thus form “part of America’s cultural claim to global hegemony” (72). Linking tourism and imperialism, he finds that though poets like Bishop did not sharply oppose imperial power, they did occasionally voice “a sense of imperial doom” and a measured skepticism about expansionism (83). Although focusing on mainstream poets with a centrist perspective, von Hallberg’s contextualized reading invites us to consider what poets on the margin critique U. S. imperial power.

Jeffrey Gray in a recent study, Mastery’s End: Travel and Postwar American Poetry (2005), also focuses on mainstream poets, including Bishop. The book turns away from critiques of empire and imperialism and instead focuses on travel as an individual experience of “absence or loss” as opposed to a trope of “colonial mastery” (17). He disagrees with Caren Kaplan’s view of Bishop’s “Questions of Travel” in her study of the metaphoric use of travel and displacement in contemporary theories. In her book

Questions of Travel, Kaplan briefly comments on Bishop's questions as inadequate for interrogating meanings of home and displacement in the context of the aftermath of colonialism and the rise of neocolonialism. In contrast, Gray reads the poem as showing a rather apolitical "irony of the quest for Eden" (44). He does not distinguish colonialism from travel nor does he historicize his claim about "mastery's end." In his reading of Bishop, the poet/traveler is an unstable entity "driving to the interior" in a rather empty, decontextualized manner (25). His reading of Derek Walcott highlights a "flight from the political to the personal" (211) without much attention to the poet's ambivalent responses to British colonial culture and thus fails to articulate the inextricable relationship of travel in Walcott's poetry to the history of "colonial mastery." If von Hallberg's centrist perspective is understandable, given that the book was published when decentralization and multiculturalism had yet to become major topics in the study of American literature and culture, Gray's lack of historicization and his failure to take into account the United States's colonial past and present renders his argument questionable at best.

Bishop raises her questions about the notions of "home" and "travel," as von Hallberg and Kaplan have noted, from the perspective of a privileged first-world tourist, who follows a route from the center to the periphery. That perspective misrecognizes those of a foreign country as behaving as "strangers" acting on a stage. Bishop herself has actually set up a background of colonial history against which to read the questions she poses: the poem in the 1965 collection is placed immediately after "Brazil, January 1, 1502," a poem that revisits the history of the Portuguese colonization of Brazil, specifically the imposition of Catholicism and the appropriation of territory. Conscious of the imperialist impulse of many Euro-American traveling experiences and her own

complicity in it, the speaker/traveler of her poems nevertheless does not attempt to resist or subvert that impulse. Her “questions of travel,” thus, are only a beginning begging for further interrogation. To what degree does colonial history shape a contemporary traveler’s perception of the “foreign”? How would power relations determine our notions of travel, the “home,” and the “foreign”? If a privileged first-world tourist’s voice represents merely part of the picture, is there an alternative kind of travel writing? If so, how would this alternative travel writing approach the relationship of the home to the world?

An examination of travel writing by Asian American poets such as Ali could greatly enrich the work done on travel and postwar American poetry. Following von Hallberg’s example of socio-political contextualizing, one would find that Ali’s travel poems are concerned with questions of displacement, nation, and imperial power. If poems like Bishop’s stop short at merely hinting at United States imperial culture, Ali’s poems about journeys between South Asia and America demonstrate how the history and aftermath of colonialism always mediate the traveler’s movement and perspective. James Clifford, in the introduction to his study of travel, argues that travel is a “norm,” as constitutive of human culture as dwelling (Routes 5). He asks whether there are possibilities of “discrepant movement” that do not conform to the “world’s violent polarization into West and East, empire and colony, developed and backward” (5, 13). Looking for the traveling route that bypasses the center-periphery dichotomy, Clifford seems to overlook the possibility of questioning and critiquing binary politics — a metaphorical bypassing or subversion — even when one follows the center-periphery route physically. The border-blurring, unhomey travel in Ali’s poems leads to

compassionate identification with the victims of imperial expansion and neocolonialism. Drawing attention to the geographical locations, languages, and forms of writing marginalized by dominating political, historical, and cultural narrative, these poems manifest transnational and transcultural travels via a different route than Bishop's and reveal a critique of power and its fixed binaries through both their subject matter and forms.

Take the central section of A Nostalgist's Map of America, for example. Opening with the title poem, the section brings the reader along on a thought-provoking journey that mixes the personal and the political, the local and the global. Written for a dying friend, the poems' tightly controlled language and form preclude the sentimentalization of death. By taking Dickinson's poem "A Route of Evanescence" as the section's epigraph, Ali's poem here first relies on a mode of intertextual travel that enables readers to rethink the text's literary rootedness. Dickinson has been largely characterized as living and writing in isolation, but recent critics have found her far from isolated intellectually, indeed, actively engaged in her culture and historical moment through reading, correspondence, and poetry writing.²⁴ Ali's numerous allusions to Dickinson align with this new reading of her. For example, referring to Dickinson's mention of "Cashmere," several of Ali's Kashmir poems have not only put the home in South Asia in interesting connection to Amherst—Dickinson's as well as his own home in America—but have also highlighted Dickinson's writing as openly linked to the world beyond her home. Here, ushering in the poem "A Nostalgist's Map of America," Ali's use of "A

²⁴ Examples of this criticism can be seen in Esdale and Perelman, both appearing in recent issues of The Emily Dickinson Journal.

Route of Evanescence” again sheds new light on Dickinson’s highly concise, imagistic, and enigmatic poem:

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel—
A Resonance of Emerald—
A Rush of Cochineal—
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head—
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning’s Ride— (qtd. in Ali 33)

Dickinson’s poem depicts a flying hummingbird touching the tip of a bush blossom, its ephemeral fleeting movement evoking the image of a postal vehicle carrying “mail from Tunis.” This local scene in the poet’s observation is linked to the outside world through association, and the distance—from Tunis to Amherst—collapses in the moment the images are revealed. The poem, after all, was written at the time of early development of telegraphy and other communication systems that brought the continents closer than ever (Esdale 18). Ali’s epigraph invites the reader to revisit this classical figure of American literary tradition—to contextualize her in her time and to see the rather worldly perspective latent behind her isolated position.

Following Dickinson’s lines, the poems in this section revolve around routes, both geographical and metaphorical. “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” deals with the speaker’s melancholy upon knowing that Phil, a close friend, is dying of AIDS.²⁵ The poem’s geographical and emotional mapping, not without homoerotic undertones, reveals a spiritual search for belonging under the burden of identity.²⁶ Opening with the

²⁵ For the reason for writing this poem and “In Search of Evanescence” see his interview with Ansari and S. Paul.

²⁶ Nelson and Dharwadker, both in survey articles, mention in passing the undertones of homosexuality in Ali’s poetry, particularly in regard to *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*. Criticism of Ali’s poetry has remained silent regarding this issue. See Nelson and Dharwadker, 255.

recollection of a driving tour toward Phil's home in Philadelphia, the poem moves from the landscape of "the dead center of Pennsylvania" to sunny Southern California, whence the dying Phil calls the speaker. The "map of America" thus outlined by the journeys is first a personal, emotional map. The speaker nostalgically recounts a time with Phil, when art—represented by Dickinson's poem "A Route of Evanescence"—was appreciated for art's sake and the journey home was carefree. Now upon the disclosure of the tragic news, the speaker finds himself at a loss for a genuinely comforting response, for all the words in his mind seem "false." Even Dickinson's poem—and art in general—remains powerless before the reality of AIDS. Word play is all that can be managed for the speaker's catharsis:

[...] Please forgive me, Phil, but I thought
of your pain as a formal feeling, one
useful for the letting go, your transfusions

mere wings to me, the push of numerous
hummingbirds, souvenirs of Evanescence
seen disappearing down a route of veins
in an electric rush of cochineal. (37)

In regular quatrains like these throughout, the poem's elegiac sensibility restrains itself from falling into sentimentalism. The speaker transforms Dickinson's hummingbird image at the end by associating it with the disease. He thus leaves more questions than answers for his readers. If language and art have insurmountable limits in the face of death, where can one find refuge and where is the ultimate home for an artist? Putting the nation in the title, Ali calls to mind the social and political issues related to homosexuality and to AIDS as a domestic plight of the United States as well as an international problem of the contemporary world. The poem's sorrow also lies in the irresolvable problems around the suggested homosexual identity of the poet and his

friend. What does Phil's moving from home to the West Coast in the last stage of his life tell about the burden of his identity and of his "dis-ease?" What does the speaker's—and the poet's—caution about his own sexual orientation say about his sense of belonging as an ethnic minority traveler in the United States? For Asian American artists like Ali, does travel represent an inevitable escape from roots, or does the route instead point to an attempt to reconstruct the conception of belonging in unhomely travel?

Ali's poem series "In Search of Evanescence" continues the meditation on language, art, and travel, and with more intertextual and intercultural references Ali's question about the personal quest increasingly opens to thinking on a larger scale. Positionality in the world becomes not just an individual concern but involves the reality and future of nations and cultures. Strung together by an elegiac mood in response to Phil's dying, the series nevertheless is as much about the speaker's reflection on his own transnational journey as about memories of Phil. In Poem 2 of the series, for example, the poet-speaker, in looking back to the last summer before parting with Phil, weaves the personal with the historical and the political. The poem opens the recollection about "that final summer seven years ago" with a line from Thomas de Quincey, "It is a year of brilliant water" (39). De Quincey's line will recur throughout the poem series, calling to mind the Victorian literary tradition with which Ali's education in India must have armed him. The poet-speaker quickly turns to describing his travel across America, when suddenly he reaches this surrealistically unhomely point:

[...] But even
when I pass—in Ohio—the one exit
to Calcutta, I don't know I've begun

mapping America, the city limits
of Evanescence now everywhere. (39)

The juxtaposition of “Ohio” and “Calcutta,” interestingly, is both surprising and natural. “Calcutta,” the name of a major city in India, Ali’s home country, is actually also the name of a small town in Ohio. The Capital of British India from 1772 to 1912, the Indian city’s name was originally in Bengali as “Kalikshetra.” “Calcutta” is marked by a foreshortening and Anglicization under British rule. Cultural geographer Yvonne Whelan notes that the colonizers’ act of “naming places” is their way of “claiming space” (65). Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in their study on Third World film also argue that “the power of creation is inextricably entwined with the power of naming” and that naming “played a crucial role in colonial history, as the ‘discoverer’ gave names to places as a mark of possession” (142). The name “Calcutta,” then, is loaded with the colonial history of South Asia. In 2001, the city changed its official English name to “Kolkata” to restore its Bengali pronunciation and largely to eliminate the legacy of British colonialism.²⁷ While the Indian city struggled to erase the name “Calcutta” because of its colonial history, the name continues in use in America. The United States in general, and the state of Ohio in particular, seems extremely fascinated with exotic places, always naming towns and cities after foreign places (Rajghatta; Hammond 183). It remains a question whether the local people were familiar with the complicated history of the Indian city when the small community in Ohio picked the Indian name for itself in the early twentieth century.²⁸ The displaced, de-historicized use is worth considering in its own historical context. For behind the apparently apolitical fascination of America with the

²⁷ For the transformation history of the Indian city’s name, see [Encyclopedia Britannica](#).

²⁸ The town changed its name to Calcutta in the early twentieth century, according to the information I got from the Historical Society of Ohio, the Calcutta (OH) Chamber of Commerce, and the Historical Society of East Liverpool, OH.

foreign, one sees twentieth century history marked by the fall of old empires and the rise of American imperialism.

In any case, the appearance of “Calcutta” in Ali’s poem stuns the reader as well as the poem’s speaker: the supposed difference between a “foreign” land and the speaker’s “home” land collapses in the same designation. Reading Isabel Archer’s unhomey state as an American expatriate in Britain in The Portrait of a Lady, Bhabha notes that “the world first shrinks for Isabel and then expands enormously... The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders of home and world become confused” (Location of Culture 13). Ali’s speaker, at this point of the poem, finds himself in a similar situation that “confuses” the home and the world. As if a mirror image of his home country, this Midwest American “Calcutta” makes the world he travels in at once strange and peculiarly familiar. The two places geographically far apart suddenly merge into one, as the place name written on the road sign pops onto the horizon, as if asking, jokingly, whether one can really leave the home and its history totally behind while traveling the world. This unhomey moment receives even more elaboration in Poem 3 of the same series:

When on Route 80 in Ohio
I came across an exit
to Calcutta

the temptation to write a poem
led me past the exit
so I could say

India always exists
off the turnpikes
of America. (41)

The link between the two Calcuttas reminds the reader of India's relationship with America in the current context of global capitalism. "Off the turnpikes of America" provides a perfect metaphor for the invisible role that countries like India play for the American consumer market by way of sweatshops, labor outsourcing, and so on. Thus, travel, or the particular traveling route, forces the poet-speaker and his readers not only to remember through a historical perspective but also to recontextualize the relationship between the home and the world.

Only a few lines away from this unhomely moment, one finds in Poem 2 in "In Search of Evanescence" the poet-speaker's travel leading to more observation about histories and cultures beyond his own:

a woman climbed the steps to Acoma,
vanished into the sky. In the ghost towns
of Arizona, there were charcoal tribes

with desert voices, among their faces
always the last speaker of a language.
And there was always thirst: a train taking me

from Bisbee, that copper landscape with bones,
into a twilight with no water. [...] (39-40)

Here, the poet-speaker takes his reader from the Midwestern highway to New Mexico and Arizona, where traces of Native American life emerge on the horizon. His westward driving, after all, seems to be an ironic re-presentation of the "trail of tears" in Native American history. The image of the woman climbing the steps of Acoma Pueblo and then vanishing is accompanied by melancholy phrasing — "vanished," "ghost," "desert voices," and "last speaker of a language." Together, they create an atmosphere of despair, a picture of the indigenous culture painfully in danger of extinction. Thanks to the research and writings of people such as Manuel Pino, Acoma has drawn attention as one

of the indigenous communities seriously affected by uranium mining in the southwestern United States (Pino). The uranium mines have brought devastating environmental, health, social, and cultural impact to Acoma and provoked heated debates about a modern nation's choices between industry and environment, between corporate benefits and the loss of indigenous culture. Considering the poem's reminder of the home *India*, Ali's reference to the predicament of *American Indians* here is more than coincidental. Columbus' misnaming of Native Americans (and mis-mapping of the world) has resulted in a possibility of identification here. The endangered American *Indian* culture is at once "home" and "foreign" to the Indian-American poet-speaker in his compassionate, cosmopolitan perspective. If India's colonial history is a painful collective memory Ali can feel as a South Asian, the American Indian tribes' subjection to neocolonialism in the economic and the political order of the contemporary United States also brings a twinge of sadness in his journey.

In this passage, the other historical reference to Bisbee, Arizona, immediately following the desert scene is worth noting too: the booming mining industry there in the early twentieth century was certainly a mark of the industrialization of modern America, the exploitation of natural resources, and industrial invasion into the landscape, which registers visibly the nation's threat to its own indigenous cultures.²⁹ Moreover, as can be seen in "The Keeper of the Dead Hotel," another poem about Bisbee later in the book, continuous industrialization in the twentieth century brought disastrous effects to the life of the lower classes as well. If "India always exists off the turnpikes of America" in the context of today's postcolonial, global economy, the "ghost towns" and "charcoal tribes" are all but ignored in the United States, and in the globalized world, economically and

²⁹ For detailed information, see <http://www.bisbeemuseum.org/>.

politically. The poem extends its elegiac mood arising from a private incident to a cosmopolitan concern.

Ali, referring to his traveling routes as the “routes of Evanescence,” harkens back to the Dickinson poem cited earlier in the section and suggests a way of looking at the indigenous cultures of Native Americans and all those endangered cultures and languages alluded to here as also following a “route of evanescence,” a process of quickly vanishing in the modern world. With the historical reference and suggested political thinking, the apparently personal, elegiac lyrics in the book have actually achieved a cultural, more precisely cross-imperial, dimension. As the poems lament the evanescence and the vulnerability of a close friend’s life, the poems are concerned as well with how the history of a declining culture or a dying language will be remembered. In its traveling and in the poet’s very act of writing, the poem remembers and resists forgetting; it revisits the history in order to put the present into sharp perspective.

In his characteristically elegiac way,³⁰ Ali’s cosmopolitan thinking and critique of the former colonial and the new world power seem mostly to be presented through the subject matter of his poems. However, even Ali’s deployment of form reveals a politics of cosmopolitanism. Influenced by his mentor and friend James Merrill, Ali is a formalist, with a strong fascination with and mastery of various conventional forms (Ghosh). In Poem 4 of “In Search of Evanescence,” for example, the speaker is the dying, last speaker of a language. Ali talked about the writing of this poem in an interview:

I had once read in the newspaper the death of an 80-year-old gentleman, the only surviving person who spoke a language called Oubykh (a Turkic language). That stayed with me a long time. Agha is a Turkish name and my ancestor from my father's side came across the mountains to Kashmir

³⁰ Ali said in the interview with Klenotic, “I see everything in a very elegiac way. It’s not something morbid, but it's part of my emotional coloring.”

as a trader nine generations ago. I saw a connection between the newspaper story and my ancestry [...] The mythic terrain of the book is not the actual historian's terrain. The superstitious mountains of Arizona are not the Karakoram Range or the Hindu Kush mountains but there are so many similarities in mythic structures across the world. This one voice comes into the poem and says, 'I'm the last speaker of this language', and I've placed him in the US Southwest. This cry to be remembered and the language to be remembered, seen in terms of my friend's death, acquired other dimensions. ("Interview with R. Ansari and Rajinder S. Paul")

The poem is written with a caesura in almost every line, recalling the old English verse form. Excavating the tradition of English, a major language in today's world, Ali puts the dying of a minor language into sharp perspective. The poem "I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror" provides another example of formal cosmopolitanism. Ali's use of the quatrain with alternating rhymes recalls the traditional elegiac quatrain, though some of the stanzas are loosely rhymed. The poem juxtaposes the Utah landscape and the imagined view of the military and political turmoil in Chile, Argentina, and Paraguay, reminding the reader of the United States' involvement in the political disturbances in South America. The poem's formal association with the elegiac quatrain further lends a melancholic coloring to the imagery and suggests a rather pessimistic political critique. More formal explorations can be found in Ali's book Rooms Are Never Finished. Largely a book of elegies for his mother, who died of brain cancer in the United States, it also connects personal grief to the predicament of Muslims in the current world. Travel is not merely a thematic concern here but the very form of the poems. In addition to the old English form, Rooms Are Never Finished includes poems written in canzone, Sapphics, ghazal, and terza rima, all of which, introduced to English from other literary traditions, have undertaken their own respective routes of transnational and cross-cultural relocation. Ali's invocation of the poetic forms from multiple literary traditions corresponds to and

even furthers the transnational travel his poems describe and reflect upon. If the poet-speaker in his poems constantly finds himself in a state of unhomeliness, the poetic forms he makes use of are rendered “unhomely,” too, reminding one that histories of culture have always been marked by border-crossing.

Ali’s use of caesurae that recalls the Anglo-Saxon verse form in Nostalgist finds its way to this collection as well. “Barcelona Airport” is a poem written in response to an airport security guard’s suspicion of his identity, “Are you carrying anything that could be dangerous for the other passengers?”³¹

O just my heart first terrorist
(a flame dies by dawn in every shade)

Crescent-lit it fits the profile
on your screen

[...]

it’s relit each time it tries to exit
this body for another’s in another century (59-60)

Thus opens the poem as an answer to the question in the epigraph. The conspicuous break in the middle of every line seems as if to visualize what Bhabha calls an “in-between” condition characteristic of an airport. An airport, after all, is a liminal space marked by the moment of “departure” or that of “arrival,” and its representation of a border temporarily suspends the traveler situated in it from the national and cultural boundaries within which he or she usually lives. The caesura then mirrors the speaker’s unhomely state at this point of suspension.

³¹ See Ghosh’s article in memory of Ali for a detailed description of this “great Wildean moment” at the Barcelona airport.

Besides the setting, the form also has to be read in relation to the poem's thematic concern. Unlike many other of Ali's airport poems that highlight the emotional significance of the geographical location ("Srinagar Airport") or the interconnection of places ("Snow on Desert"), "Barcelona Airport" shows more explicitly the speaker's anxiety of identity at the unhomely state, particularly of the speaker's—in this case just the poet's—racial and national identity. Again, one thinks of the poet's South Asian home between two nuclear powers and the "terrorist" label easily associated with South Asian Muslims. Wittily answering the security guard's question, the speaker gives voice to the guard's unarticulated suspicion and ironically designates his own heart as a "terrorist," potentially dangerous ("lit," "relit") and restlessly inclining to cross boundaries, both physical and temporal ("tries to exit this body for another's, in another century"). His sarcastic answer resists stereotypical inspection in a powerful and poetic way. In this light, the caesura in every line, very often with force and abruptness, seems also to make visible the divide between cultures with which the traveler/speaker is confronted. Read in the current context of the America-led, Britain-involving war on terror, the poem's drawing upon the old English poetic tradition becomes particularly thought-provoking: how can one deal with the apparently insurmountable divide found in the space of borders in the present reality? Whereas literary tradition can transcend historical and cultural contingencies and artistic creation can enable movement across the world and across time, it seems too difficult to find a way out in reality. Later in the book, in a ghazal, the speaker asks a question and echoes the frustration in the Barcelona incident, "And who is the terrorist, who the victim? / We'll know if the country is polled in real time" (69). In a highly illustrative form, Ali's poem "Barcelona Airport" provides

a vivid picture of the predicament of a contemporary transnational traveler, subject to racial and political prejudice. He invites readers to think about the current war on terror, which has newly created such a simplistic dichotomy between Muslims as potential terrorists and the rest of the world, especially the dominant First World countries.

If physical travel must be limited within temporal, spatial, and political considerations, the use of a variety of forms originating in languages other than English provides a means of resistance to and subversion of the English-dominated global culture. While Ali's use of the canzone in the elegy for his mother ("Lenox Hill") and the terza rima in an imagined, poetic conversation with James Merrill ("I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World") makes visible the possibility of intertextual and intercultural travel, it is the ghazal, the form Ali has been well known for, that best illustrates Ali's politics of travel and politics of form. This particular poetic form originated in ancient Arabia in the seventh century, or possibly even earlier, and then became a poetic form popular in many languages including Persian, German, Urdu, and English (Ali Ravishing DisUnities 1). Composed of a series of couplets—each autonomous thematically yet related by association, memory, or cultural expectation—a ghazal's formal unity is based on rhyme, refrain, and prosody.³² Tracing the reception and appropriation of the form in contemporary American poetry since the 1960s with translations and writings by Adrienne Rich and other poets, David Caplan recognizes Ali's major contribution to the ghazal in contemporary American poetry. For Ali, the ghazal "dramatizes his tangled literary and cultural loyalties" (Caplan 54). On more than one occasion Ali describes American poets' ignorance and misunderstanding of the "real" ghazal form. Caplan notes,

³² For introduction to the form, see Ali's introduction to Ravishing DisUnities or his notes in Call Me Ishmael Tonight.

“Employing the rhetoric of cultural possession, Ali often quotes his own poetry to illustrate ‘the real thing,’ the authentic ghazal, and its requisite formal features” (55). Indeed, Ali has criticized implicitly Adrienne Rich’s and other American poets’ “misuse” of the form and proposes ghazal writing that conforms to its traditional formal features with a stricter rhyming and refrain scheme. However, to read his criticism and proposal as a “rhetoric of cultural possession” would be a misunderstanding of his view of culture and the world. As Caplan has failed to notice, Ali is well aware of the problematics of such fixed binary opposites as West/East and mainstream/margin.³³ Insisting on restoring the stricter form of ghazal in English, Ali invites a more serious and complete understanding of an art form that belongs to the “other.” He rightly notes that Adrienne Rich’s and others’ Americanized ghazal captures the “thematic freedom” of the form to suit their own aesthetic politics. What he actually opposes is the intentional misuse or exoticization of the “other” (Ravishing DisUnities 12).

In a ghazal dedicated to Edward Said,³⁴ Ali writes about the state of exile, and pays tribute to Said’s theory of cultural politics with a perfect performance of the form. The chant-like refrain of “by exiles,” which appears at the end of every couplet at once highlights the thematic concern and evokes a sad feeling of endlessness associated with the forever-wandering state of an exile. Stringed together with the refrain, with the

³³ In Ali’s introduction to the anthology of “real ghazals in English” he edited, he never fails to lend a joking voice to his apparently “insider’s” perspective while introducing the ghazal tradition as a native speaker of Urdu language. His words such as “to be teasingly petty, I offered the pronunciation: *ghuzzle*” and “I found it tantalizing to strike a playful pose of Third-World arrogance, laced with a Muslim snobbery” need to be read alongside his understanding of postcolonial theories, which can be seen in this statement: “I hope it is clear that my use of ‘West’ and ‘Western’ assumes immensely deconstructive qualifications [...] I must add that there is no such thing as the ‘East’.” See Ali Ravishing DisUnities 1, 2, 12.

³⁴ The ghazal is first included in Rooms Are Never Finished without the dedication, though from Mahmoud Darwish’s lines in the epigraph and the opening couplet it can be seen that the poet is speaking to Said. It is later included in Call Me Ishmael Tonight, where a dedication note is added at the end of the poem.

rhyiming syllable preceding the refrain, and also with the metrical consistency, the couplets in this ghazal are written as autonomous units, precisely representing a traditional ghazal form. However, the apparently independent couplets actually establish a sense of unity and community that deconstructs religious and social boundaries.

In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles.
You learn your strange fate: You were exiled by exiles.
[...]
Crucified Mansoor over the wheat of Egypt,
God's loneliness—Just His—compiled by exiles.

By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought from Palestine—
It shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles.
[...]
“Even things that are true can be proved.” Even they?
Swear not by Art but, dear Oscar Wilde, by exiles.
[...]
Will you, Beloved Stranger, ever witness Shahid—
two destinies at last reconciled by exiles? (72-73)

From Edward Said referred to in the opening couplet, who is “exiled by exiles,” to the great Muslim mystic martyr Mansoor and Oscar Wilde in the middle, and to the poet himself mentioned as required in the concluding couplet, the structure of the poem places the originally isolated figures together and leaves the relationship between their different stories open to interpretation. A close examination would reveal that they all represent the “other”— in religious (Mansoor and Ali as Muslims), sexual (Wilde—and perhaps Ali—as homosexual), racial or cultural terms (Said as Middle-Eastern and Ali as South Asian in America). But instead of lamenting the rootless situation of “exiles,” the poem creates a community of travelers across temporal and spatial borders. For as the “other” and “exiles,” they all must confront questions like Mahmoud Darwish’s in the poem’s epigraph, “Where should we go after the last frontiers, / where should the birds fly after the last sky?” And the locations associated with them, though far apart geographically,

are brought together, equal to each other and without distinctions of the “first world” and the “third world,” the “East” and the “West,” Islam and the rest of the world. Different as their fates are, compassion across borders is possible (“two destinies... reconciled”).

Ali believes in the significance of form and the possibility of integrating political engagement with formal experimentation. The Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz’s combination of the ghazal form and political ideals is of great inspiration to him:

Form has been associated [...]—and quite wrongly, really—with what holds truth back, especially political truth. But as Faiz said, there is nothing good or bad in any poetic form but the poet makes it so. And he used this very strict form to express an impassioned left-wing politics—using the stock figure of the Beloved to figure as the Revolution.
(Ravishing DisUnities 12)

Ali himself weaves thinking about the history of colonialism and the present predicaments of minority cultures into his very use of ghazal as well. As demonstrated in the ghazal above, he manages to break down boundaries between formal experiment and social engagement and to critique the politics of binaries.

Although described as a writer of “Indian diaspora,” a “Post-colonial migrant” poet, an Indian poet, and a South Asian American writer, Ali identified himself first and foremost as a “poet in English” (Interview with Christine Benvenuto). With his thematic concerns with the home and the world and his border-crossing formal explorations, Ali’s work indeed defies those fixed categories with a poetic landscape that foregrounds the interconnectivity of territories and cultures and invites compassion across linguistic, national, and religious boundaries. The transcultural “travel” revealed in his themes and through his forms opens up new ways to read Asian North American poetry. While Ali writes in verse forms from a variety of literary traditions, the poets in the following chapters engage in more experimental modes of transcultural writing by deploying prose

as well as verse forms from other cultures and by even crossing boundaries between various media.

Chapter Two

“Continental Drift”: Kimiko Hahn’s Translational Poetics

In a poem titled “Asian American Lit. Final” from her recent collection The Narrow Road to the Interior (2006), the prize-winning poet Kimiko Hahn ends a series of questions and concerns about teaching Asian American literature with these lines: “I plan on proposing a course on Asian American work inspired / by/influenced by Asian literature. Title: Continental Drift” (93). The geological notion “continental drift,” a precursor to the theory of plate tectonics, refers to the hypothesis that today’s continents broke off from a single super-continent and then were propelled through the ocean floors into their present positions after moving apart from or colliding with each other (LeGrand 40).³⁵ With the term, Hahn calls attention not only to the hidden connections between different geographies and cultural traditions but also to the movement of cultural elements from one geographical location to another. In fact, Hahn’s own poetry precisely belongs to this category she defines as “continental drift,” since it is significantly “inspired by / influenced by” Japanese literature as well as literature in other languages. This chapter studies how Hahn’s writing weaves elements from Japanese literature, Chinese literature, and French feminist theories into a complex poetic landscape, which enables dialogues between women’s writing from different histories and geographies and explores new modes of transnational feminist writing through formal innovation.

³⁵ Also see “Continental drift” in Challinor’s Dictionary of Geology.

Translation is the primary mode of Hahn's intertextual writing. In her early poems, she not only cites and critically reads translations of East Asian texts but also includes her own translations. In more recent work, Hahn's use of image and multiple literary forms from classical Japanese literature demonstrates an attempt to intervene in the oversimplified representation or misinterpretation of other traditions by foregrounding a reading praxis based on historically and culturally sophisticated understandings of the "other." Not a published literary translator like Ali, Hahn's work nevertheless shares an interest in exploring the potential of poetic forms across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Critics such as Traise Yamamoto, in reading Hahn's earlier books, have noted the trope of translation as a significant feature of her writings about female Asian American subjectivity. My study focuses on how Hahn develops a translational poetics by incorporating the practices of both criticism and translation in her writing. While her earlier poems, such as those from the volume Earshot (1992), foreground the problematics of translation and raise numerous questions about reading and writing under the unequal relations of power, it is her more recent poems in Mosquito and Ant (1999) and The Narrow Road to the Interior (2006) that show more clearly how to free up the possibilities of transcultural writing without marginalizing or exoticizing "other" cultures. Through practices of "retranslation" and "untranslation," she revises cross-cultural writings of such modernist poets as Ezra Pound on some occasions and tries to "undo" the existing translations of such literary forms as *zuihitsu* and *tanka* on others. Particularly concerned with the gender politics of language and reading, Hahn's poetry of "continental drift" shows how critical engagement with translation provides one means by which ethnic women to achieve poetic voice.

Questions of Translation

Hahn is the daughter of a Japanese-American mother and a German-American father. Her passion for Japanese literature and culture—which she studied in college and graduate school—can be seen in her early engagement with Japanese literature.

Especially remarkable in her poetry are her persistent references to The Tale of Genji, the classical Japanese novel attributed to the court lady Murasaki Shikibu, written in the early eleventh century near the peak of the Heian Period (794-1185). It is sometimes referred to as the world's first novel. Many of the poems in Hahn's early collection Earshot, for example, deal with thoughts and questions about translations of The Tale of Genji and other Japanese texts. In an interview with François Luong, Hahn says, “traditional East Asian aesthetics and forms have influenced my work. When I studied Japanese literature in college, the works by Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shōnagon, and others were essential to my development. I think (I hope) I have approached these writings from the point of view of a Japanese-American woman, rather than a Western tourist. I hope I bring to the readings a possession of this culture” (n.pag.). Hahn differentiates her own approach to these texts from an exoticizing, “tourist” view point, but how specifically does she “approach” them, and what kind of cultural “possession” is this? In another interview with Laurie Sheck, she reveals that her interest in Japan comes more from her German-American father than from her mother: “Ironically, though, my mother, because of the war and being second-generation Japanese, rejected her Japanese background, which was pretty typical of that generation, while my father, on the other hand, was deeply curious and was studying Asian culture even before he met my mother. So it's through my

father's interest that we came back around to my mother's culture" (n.pag.). Because of this, Hahn's approach to Japanese culture, ironically, is precisely influenced by "a Western tourist's"—her father's—attitude. Her attention to Japan is almost entirely focused on the classical or pre-World War II literature and tradition.³⁶ Avoiding the history of Japanese American internment and twentieth-century Japanese American history, this focus makes her self-proclaimed "Japanese-American" writing particularly concerned with how one represents or translates material from other cultural and temporal frames.

Literary translations often work as points of departure for Hahn's adventurous explorations of poetic language and poetic forms. Her early poems, with their critical reading of translation texts, participate in twentieth-century translation studies from her unique position as an Asian American poet. Critics trace modern and contemporary translation studies to Walter Benjamin's classic essay "The Task of the Translator," written in 1923 as an introduction to his German translation of Baudelaire's Tableaux Parisiens. It was a time when Euro-American modernist literature engaged actively in the practice and discussion of literary translation.³⁷ In the essay, Benjamin differentiates the work of a writer from that of a translator: whereas a poet works with his/her specific selection of language, or what he terms as the "specific linguistic contextual aspects," a translator—far from rendering a literal meaning—takes the original text as a "point of departure" in order to liberate the "pure language" out of the original language and release it into his/her own (76-80). By the sublime-sounding, metaphysical term "pure

³⁶ In her seven poetry collections, I only found one poem, titled "The Bath: August 6, 1945" and published in her first collection, Air Pocket, regarding Japan during World War II.

³⁷ See Yao, Translation and the Language of Modernism, 1-22, for an illuminating reading that historicizes Benjamin's essay in modernist writers' extensive interest and engagement in translation.

language,” Benjamin suggests the existence of a pre-linguistic, divine “language” superior to all existing languages, which can never be realized but only approximated in translation. For Benjamin, translation is not a communicative act: only “bad” translations focus on “transmitting information” (69). Translation is rather a “mode” of writing that “issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife” and thus plays a significant role in a work’s “survival,” or “ever-renewed” life in history (71-72). With its theological connotations in explaining what a translator does, Benjamin’s theory clearly resists a Eurocentric mode of translation. Benjamin believes that “a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification” (78). Benjamin appears to be very open to the influence of foreign languages on his own language German, which is clearly shown from his substantial quotation of the German writer Rudolf Pannwitz:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign work. ...The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. [...] He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. (qtd. in Benjamin 80-81)

In the passage, Pannwitz objects to the assimilationist translations, which tends to absorb “foreign” texts into the existing system of the translator’s own language. His, and Benjamin’s, liberating view of both translation and languages suggests that a translator should welcome the transformative impact that the “foreign” may bring to the “self” through the act of translating. As Tejaswini Niranjana has commented in her 1992 book Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context, “Benjamin’s

citation indicates how he values heterogeneity over homogeneity, and the contamination of translation over the purity of the original” (120). Benjamin’s openness toward heterogeneity and transformation, in a sense, has anticipated what contemporary translation studies increasingly advocates today.

In the past few decades translation studies have paid increasing attention to the question of how to understand the cultural politics of the self-other relationship involved in translation. In postcolonial contexts, critics of translation are particularly concerned with how languages always need to be seen within unequal relations among races, cultures, and nations. Gayatri Spivak in her essay “The Politics of Translation,” first published in 1992, discusses the “task of the translator,” too, from the perspectives of translator and postcolonial critic. She echoes Benjamin in multiple ways but with a more specific focus on literary translation as a site that reveals the politics of gender and unequal relations between nations. Like Benjamin, Spivak finds translation more than a task of transmitting information. For her, translation is “the most intimate act of reading” (183). Her “erotic” metaphor in this regard clearly recalls Benjamin’s emphasis on “lovingly” working with the details of the original. Spivak argues that, particularly in the case of translating non-European women’s literature, the translator should “surrender” to the original text and attend to not only the “logic” of language but the “rhetoricity” of texts that often disrupts that “logic.” She finds that translators of third-world women’s texts often lack sufficient care about and engagement with the social logic and rhetorical complexity involved in the original text (181-185). She criticizes the double standards that apply to translation depending on the geopolitical position of the author:

If we were thinking of translating Marianne Moore or Emily Dickinson, the standard for the translator could not be “anyone who can conduct a

conversation in the language of the original (in this case English).” When applied to a third world language, the position is inherently ethnocentric. (188)

Spivak argues that, to fully engage with the original text, “the task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency” (177). Not merely an important work about how to translate, Spivak’s essay provides illuminating guidelines for how to approach a foreign text without exoticizing it. She reminds us of the necessity of a nuanced cultural and historical investigation about the gender and class complications of a text. At the same time, she urges us to consider how to understand the dynamics between the form and politics of a text and how to avoid ethnocentrically reducing the text to an ideological carrier.

Translation for ethnic American writers translation often becomes, in Martha Cutter’s words, “a space of both peril and promise: a mode of literacy wherein they find something previously lost in the silences of an ethnic parent or in a language in which they no longer have fluency” (7). Drawing heavily on non-English literary texts, Hahn’s early poems are significantly marked by translations of Japanese texts. For her, translation, either by herself or by others, is indeed “a mode of literacy” and a generative force in exploring Asian American poetics. Her (mostly autobiographical) speaker often occupies the position of a critic of translation like Benjamin and Spivak. In a poem, suggestively titled “Comp. Lit.” from her 1992 volume Earshot, Hahn questions the centrality of a male perspective in existing translations of Murasaki Shikibu’s The Tale of Genji. Traise Yamamoto in her insightful reading of the poem argues that Hahn can be seen as a “metatranslator” of Murasaki’s text, competing with previous translators of the text with her own suggestions as to the female perspective and agency in the original text

(247). However, unlike Benjamin or Spivak, Hahn's speaker complicates the issue of translation with her tricky position as a mixed-race, female Asian American poet. The speaker is forced to confront daunting questions about her own positionality in relation to Japanese and American cultures while reading the English versions of the Japanese text. What makes the situation even more difficult is that, having forgotten most of her *bungo*—the classical literary Japanese in which the original text is written—she is unable to seriously assess the accuracy of the translated texts. The gnawing sense of abjection thus caused makes visible a burden of ethnic identity: to what extent is she as an Asian American writer responsible for bridging two cultures? “Her act of translation,” as Yamamoto puts it, “is, finally, inexact and ambiguous at best” (247). Throughout the poem, the speaker questions not only the texts she reads but also her own critical judgment. In this process, the poem as a perplexed critical reading experience unfolds a series of irresolvable problems about how to read a translated text and how to see the “task of the translator”:

What happens when there are two texts
in translation?
Who can we trust
when our *bungo* has deteriorated
to elementary tables
for *beshi*, *kemu*, *gotoshi*.
How can we compare
without the original (81)

These lines highlight the inability to judge a translation, an inability which is the result of the speaker's “deteriorated” understanding of the original language. The rapid succession of questions makes visible the speaker's frustration. However, the poem does not dwell on this predicament but quickly moves on to quote passages from Arthur Waley's and Edward Seidensticker's translations of The Tale of Genji. Citations of the two versions

continue to appear throughout the poem, interrupting the speaker's voice and thus edging the reader as well into the position of a translation critic, a position requiring critical and comparative reading.

Halfway through the poem, the speaker juxtaposes one of Waley's elaborate, lyric passages with Seidensticker's characteristic succinct rendering. In response, Hahn's speaker voices a series of questions even more breathtaking than those that open the poem.

“With many timid glances towards him she began to write. Even the childish manner in which she grasped the brush gave him a thrill of delight which he was at a loss to explain.”

AW, 107

“It was strange that even her awkward, childish way of holding the brush should so delight him.”

ES, 110

Chirp, chirp, chirp, she said.
Translation?
Where do the translators translate?
New York? Tokyo? Kyoto?
At their desk? tatami? longhand?
Can we go from stroke to scribble?
And who are *they*?
When you turn your back
will they laugh
because you forgot your *bungo*;
can't even understand the entry
not so much to read
but to correspond
from her small heart. (82)

The quoted passages are from the moment in the book where Prince Genji is struck by the beauty of the little girl Murasaki and takes her to live in his house. The little girl resembles his stepmother with whom he has fallen in love. Genji provides her with everything she needs and teaches her to write, secretly waiting for her to grow up to be

his lover. It was a scene that illustrates the male protagonist's dominant position in the relationship between himself and Murasaki. Interestingly, the speaker's imagination about the translators' amusement over her ignorance in the succeeding lines mirrors the Genji-Murasaki scene in the quoted passage, making one wonder whether or not the relationship dominated by the male figure in the quote precisely implies a pattern for the translator-reader relationship. The poem's speaker, also the reader of the translations in the poem, however, seems rather skeptical about both translators. The sharp contrast between the two versions indeed makes one wonder how the original text reads. Waley's passage begins with a sentence describing Murasaki, emphasizing her "timid" psychological state; Seidensticker's, in contrast, gets to the point without much elaboration. Following the quotations, the speaker's questions about the translators' geographical locations and their identities cast doubt on their sufficient investment in the history and culture in which the text was written. In fact, as a famous translator of classical Chinese and Japanese literature in the early twentieth century, Waley had never been to Asia (De Gruchy 34-55). His translation of The Tale of Genji was published in six volumes from 1921 to 1933. Not a complete version, his translation has been criticized for its inaccuracy, as he transforms the original text, its hybrid form combining prose and poetry, into a largely modern novel in his Edwardian English (De Gruchy 125-127; Damrosch 296). Waley's is an "assimilative" rendering, involving numerous paraphrases to make the text accessible to English readers. Seidensticker's version, published in 1976, is more scholastic, characterized by closer rendering of the characters' social background, and "condensation and reductionism" in language and style (Cranston 6). Seidensticker, well-known for his technically more accurate rendering, provides more

annotations and makes a great effort to maintain the poetic forms that appear in the original novel. However, his laconic version lacks the rhythm of the original's richly embroidered prose (Cranston 25). Hahn's speaker does not show any trace of being aware of the critical discourse surrounding the two translations, although the contrasting styles of the two are clearly staged in her text-within-a-text.

Throughout the poem Hahn's speaker continues to think about the passages she quotes. She ponders the ambiguity of the original author's attitude toward gender issues:

She wrote with such childish abandon
that error took on a style.
To make her his.
What would this mean:
wait a few years and put aside her toys,
replace them with strips of paper,
feel her crushed beneath him.
Why did a woman write this?
Did she speak from the small heart
[...]
Do I examine from the male persona? (85 original emphasis)

"Why did a woman write this?" Without access to the original, the poet-speaker asks whether Murasaki's original work simply reinforces male domination through the figure of Genji. Could the original somehow suggest female agency and resistance against male domination? Disappointingly, neither translator provides answers. Yamamoto argues that this uncertainty of Hahn's speaker "opens a space for the female subject" (247). What Yamamoto does not clarify is that Hahn's poem raises questions about interpretation on three levels. First, how does the original author Murasaki interpret the gender relations she writes about? Second, how do the male translators represent those relations? Third, how should the reader understand the relations represented and mediated through the male translators? Hahn's poem is as much about the latter two questions as about the first.

Unable to access the original text, the speaker finds the questions unsolvable. All she can do is turn to the discursive agency of the woman author. The recurrence of the phrase “small heart” is striking since, through it, the speaker identifies with the author of the Japanese text, forming an alliance against the male translators and the male protagonist.

In the poem “Revolution,” which appears earlier in the same collection, Hahn tells us how the language of The Tale of Genji is remarkable for its implications of female agency in Japanese literary history. “Forbidden to learn Chinese / the women wrote in the language / of their islands” (17), Hahn writes, referring to the court women of the Heian period who had been denied formal education in Chinese language—the more privileged language in Japan at the time, just like the use of Latin among the privileged in medieval Europe.³⁸ According to the Japanologist Donald Keene (whom Hahn probably studied with as a graduate student at Columbia), the court women enjoyed much more freedom and more access to learning than ordinary women; they left numerous writings about their life in the Japanese script, *kana* (109-110). The Tale of Genji was one of the most extraordinary representatives of this vernacular literature that began flourishing in the Heian period (Keene 112-113). Waley and Seidensticker both talk about women’s court life in the Heian period in the introductions to their translations. Yet, neither of them pays much attention to the female agency shown in this initiation of a new literary language. While Seidensticker only gives a brief introduction to the author, Waley captures some of the most interesting features of Murasaki as a writer in his introduction. Murasaki, through Waley’s review of her diary, appears as a lively woman who loves literature, cares for details of appearances, sees the rigid-minded princess she works for as “dull,”

³⁸ For more about this information see Keene 112. Hahn also mentions this in an earlier book she co-authored, We Stand Our Ground 9.

“narrow,” and “uncompromising” (viii). She secretly learned the Chinese language (ix), and longs for more freedom, a working environment where she might converse freely with men and become “lively and amusing” (ix). With substantial quotations from Murasaki’s diary, Waley’s introduction is almost entirely about her courtly life, with minimal discussion about the work, leaving one to wonder whether Murasaki’s novel implicitly critiques the dominant gender dynamics.

Forming a web of complicated relations between the characters in the text-within-a-text, between a female writer and her male translators, between the female writer and the female reader, between the nations where each of these “characters” is located, Hahn’s poem reflects on the hierarchy of cultures, genders, and races often operating in translation and cross-cultural writing. The classical Japanese text cannot be seen exactly as belonging to the “Third World” women’s literature in Spivak’s criticism, because Japan has a history as a colonizing, imperialist power in Asia. Yet, since its “opening” to the West in the mid-nineteenth century, especially with the popularity of such Orientalist narratives as Puccini’s Madama Butterfly, Japanese culture has been consistently weakened and feminized as an “absolute Other” in the Western imagination (Yamamoto 11). Hahn’s implicit critique of the translators’ lack of attention to the issue of female agency in the ancient Japanese text follows the same line as Spivak’s criticism of problematic translations of Third-world women’s writings. At the end of Hahn’s poem, the interrogations about the translations are replaced by critical imagination of the translator’s life:

The translator puts the pen down
and stretches his arms and neck.
Genji is complete.
He’s completed the text

in time for the fall semester.
The students call him professor and bore him
but brings a salary, medical benefits, an office.
The volumes of translation are exact.
Exactly right.
He walks into the bathroom,
turns off the light and sits down.

The speaker suggests a dissatisfaction with the “complete,” “exactly right” translation, or the emphasis on literal fidelity, not without a Benjaminian echo. The meaning of a literary translation, as the speaker wants to show, should be more than providing an “exact” representation of a text and thus attaining its academic currency. The poem “Comp. Lit.” leaves the reader in a rather frustrating position, without answering the question of how a translator can show and achieve more.

In the poem “The Izu Dancer,” which immediately follows “Comp. Lit.” in Earshot, Hahn crosses the line Benjamin draws between the author and the translator when she herself translates Kawabata Yasunari’s story “The Izu Dancer,” a story published in 1925 and a classic of modern Japanese literature. Writing about her experience of reading, translating, and thinking about Kawabata’s story, she quotes a number of sentences and words from the original Japanese text and translates them into English, making the poem a modernist, bilingual collage. The original Japanese text provides a “point of departure” in the Benjaminian sense, not for her to seek the “pure language” but to explore the possibility of translating as a mode of creative writing. The task of translation, here, is part of her task as a poet. Benjamin as a critic-translator emphasizes what a good translator or translation can achieve—making possible an “afterlife” or the “survival” of the original and enacting the “kinship” between languages. Hahn as a poet-translator in the poem is more concerned with the process of translating—

or what she calls the “journey inside the words”—than with the outcome (Earshot 87). In this process, her ultimate goal is to transfer the “fragrance” of the Japanese words into her own English writing. She uses the word “fragrance” repeatedly in both “Comp. Lit.” and “The Izu Dancer.” She probably borrows it from Tanizaki Junichiro’s In Praise of Shadows, a book on Japanese aesthetics, in which Tanizaki argues that the “trance” of literary language can bring resonance to the ear, hues and sparkles to the eye, and fragrances to the nose (paraphrased in Lamarre 29).³⁹ Is “fragrance” translatable? What if her version involves inaccuracy as well? In translating the *kanji* “思” for example, her ideographic explanation “field over heart means remember” (91) is a misreading reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s often over-simplified interpretations of Chinese characters. For although looking like “field (田) over heart (心),” the character “思,” in both Chinese and Japanese, is actually a variant of “恩,” ideographically a combination of “囟,” meaning brain, and “心,” meaning heart.⁴⁰ If in “Comp. Lit.” the speaker exposes the problematics of Waley’s and Seidensticker’s translations, the poem “The Izu Dancer” makes one wonder whether the speaker’s, and also Hahn’s, act of translating is also affected by her own arbitrariness and her particular cultural positionality as a Japanese American who already “forgot [her] *bungo*” (82).

In fact, Hahn’s speaker seems aware of the inevitability of mistranslation in her own practice. Like “Comp. Lit.,” the poem often shifts between scenes from the speaker’s own memory and the book she is reading. In so doing, it invites consideration of how the experiences of cross-cultural reading and writing can both aid and complicate

³⁹ In the endnotes for the book, Hahn mentions she has referred to this book but does not make clear for what purpose she does that or which part of the book is relevant for her.

⁴⁰ See 思 in 说文解字 Xu Shen’s Etymological Dictionary and Denshi Jisho—Online Japanese Dictionary.

the speaker's, and the poet Hahn's, exploration of female subjectivity. The ending of the poem is especially worth considering. There an incident of misrecognition illuminates the speaker's struggle with translating and raises further questions about the problems of racialized identification in cross-cultural encounters:

A waitress pours me a warmup and I look over
to catch the back of a man's neck,
his heavy black hair in a severe razor-cut style.
I imagine he is B.D. Wong
the incredibly handsome actor in *M. Butterfly*.
His moist white cotton shirt
hangs a bit off his shoulders
and he holds a cup of cappuccino in one hand
and a slim hard-cover book in the other.
I imagine he turns around to ask for—
an ashtray
and ends up at my table
talking about contemporary poetry, mutual friends
and international affairs.
But as the man gathers his belongings he turns
and instead of the aristocratic profile and rakish glow
it's an older Italian man, moustached and serious.
But briefly that fragrance!

The reference to David Henry Hwang's drama *M. Butterfly*, an important and popular Asian American work, is hardly accidental. With Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* as a prehistory, Hwang's *M. Butterfly* tells the story of a romance between a French diplomat and a male Chinese opera singer who pretends to be a woman. Because of his persistent fantasy about a submissive Oriental woman like Cio-Cio-San in Puccini's opera, the diplomat cannot bear the true identity of his lover and commits suicide at the end.⁴¹ Hahn's speaker, while reading and translating her Japanese text in a cafe, mistakes a stranger for the Chinese American gay actor B. D. Wong, whose performance in *M. Butterfly* must have impressed her. This is a moment of both racial and sexual

⁴¹ See Eng 138 for an insightful reading of the play.

misrecognition. The speaker's almost erotic "blazon" of the "male" figure mirrors the white, colonial fantasy about the Oriental woman dramatized in Hwang's play. Followed by an imagined encounter, Hahn's speaker is only left with a reminiscence of an aesthetic pleasure, a mere trace of what she tries to grasp in cross-cultural encounter. The episode wittily links issues of translation, misreading, and the construction of racial identity. Not just with an imagined Asian American figure, the speaker's intentionally arbitrary and playful designation of the stranger as "Italian" further shows the fluidity and unreliability of racial identification. With the use of the word "fragrance," which recalls her goal in translating the literary text, the speaker equates racial and sexual identification with the act of translating. Are the multiple layers of misrecognition and fantasy in this passage, then, trying to remind us of the inevitability of misreading and being-misread involved in translation?

Nü Shu: A Feminist Retranslation

Homi Bhabha's theory of "cultural translation" seems "both indispensable and inadequate" in addressing the questions Hahn's poems inspire.⁴² Bhabha extends the Benjaminian view of literary translation into his theorizing of "cultural translation," a concept that foregrounds the liminality of diasporic and migrant experience instead of the textual translation from one language to another and emphasizes the possibilities that displacement and relocation may generate. Bhabha compares the Benjaminian notion of the untranslatable "nucleus" of a text to the unassimilability of cultural difference. For him, Benjamin's openness to the "foreignness" of a text or a language reminds us of the

⁴² Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea that "European thought [. . .] is both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India" inspires me here (6).

importance of valuing cultural difference (325-326). He illustrates the idea with The Satanic Verses, in which Salman Rushdie “relocates the Koran’s ‘intentionality’ by repeating and reinscribing it in the locale of the novel of postwar cultural migrations and diasporas” (324). The focus of Bhabha’s theory is not so much on the actual translation of the original “subject-matter” as it is on cultural translation as a discursive practice through which minority groups can transgress and transform the assumed homogeneity of the dominant culture. For him, “the migrant culture of the ‘in-between’, the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture’s untranslatability; and in so doing, it moves the question of culture’s appropriation beyond the assimilationist’s dream, or the racist nightmare, of a ‘full transmissal of subject-matter’” (321).

In her recent work, Hahn seems to have moved away from her earlier struggle with the problematic nature of textual translations and the translation of “subject matter.” Moving between traditions and languages in a more subtle and artful way, Hahn’s poems of the past decade reveal more about the intriguing histories of Chinese and Japanese literary languages. Her recent work, informed by these histories, demonstrates intertextual influences and dialogues by transplanting East Asian poetic forms into the framework of her own contemporary English lyric. Hahn’s practice articulates Bhabha’s notion of “cultural translation,” through which she continues to explore the possibilities of her “in-between,” “interstitial” positionality as a female, Asian American writer. The introduction of such Japanese forms as *zuihitsu*, for example, brings “newness” into the prose poem in English, resulting in a hybrid poetic form. She says in “Revolution” from Earshot: “If I could translate the culture / woman cultivate / I would admit to plum / and plumb” (18). She seems to be predicting a movement away from textual translation,

which struggles with language and textual details (“plum” and “plumb”), to “cultural translation,” which aims to transfer the Heian women’s agency in initiating a literary language into her own writing across cultural and temporal distances.

Yet, unlike Bhabha’s formulations, Hahn never foregoes her profound interest in the linguistic and textual dimension of “translation.” For Hahn, language provides the central lens through which she explores the representation of the cultural other or the establishment of female agency in literature. Harish Trivedi in his critique of Bhabha’s theory of “cultural translation” has warned us that overemphasizing the abstract, metaphoric dimensions of “translation” runs the risk of erasing the importance of linguistic and textual translations in promoting cross-cultural literacy and further marginalizing—even eroding entirely—minor languages and cultures in global contexts. Hahn is deeply concerned with transnational literacy, on which any “translation” should be based. Apparently moving away from her earlier attention to the details of translated texts, her recent work continuously calls attention to the importance of attending to the complicated gender politics and historical forces involved in the representation of the cultural other. If Bhabha’s “cultural translation” expands the term “translation” to a wide range of diasporic and minority writings, Hahn’s writing represents a specific kind of “cultural translation,” which seeks to develop her cross-cultural poetics through practices related to linguistic and textual translation.

Hahn’s *nü shu* poems in the 1999 volume Mosquito and Ant provide an interesting example of feminist retranslation. With imaginatively rewritten images, the poems re-present the exotic feminine, East Asian “other” in Poundian “translation” of Asian texts and thus reveal a strategic link between the Chinese tradition and the French

feminist discourse *écriture féminine*. In Mosquito and Ant, Hahn's poems are continually inspired by the Japanese Heian women writers, but she draws more significantly on sources of Chinese women writings, including The Orchid Boat: Women Poets of China, The Immortal Sisters: Secrets of Taoist Women, and the *nü shu* poems. As Robert Grotjohn has noted in discussing the "interlingual poetics" of Mosquito and Ant, Hahn uses the structure of Chinese *nü shu* as a framework for her poems (220). Referring to Carolyn Lei-Lanilau's research and translation of *nü shu* poems, Hahn explains in the endnotes that the phrase "mosquito and ant" refers to "nu shu," a nearly extinct writing system invented probably a thousand years ago by Chinese women, excluded from formal education (101). In standardized Chinese pinyin, or Romanization of the Chinese pronunciation, the term *nü shu* (女书), literally women('s) writing, refers to a script exclusively used by women in the Jiangyong County of Hu-nan Province in southern China. Scholars have not determined for certain when and how it originated. The earliest *nü shu* work found thus far is dated to the mid-nineteenth century. Extremely slim and miniscule compared with Chinese characters, the script was called "long-leg mosquito writing," "fly-head writing," or "ant writing" in a regional cultural report in the 1950s, probably its earliest appearance in official discourse. Since its rediscovery by Chinese anthropologists and ethnographers in the 1980s, it has been officially called "*nü shu*" and has attracted tremendous academic attention both within and beyond China (Gong 23).⁴³ The existing *nü shu* writings consist mostly of correspondence between women friends, sworn sisters, or relatives. They include numerous poems about the women's joy and sadness in domestic life and songs written for special occasions such as weddings or

⁴³ For the history of *nü shu*, also see Liu and McLaren.

birthday celebrations. The *nü shu* poems are written predominantly in the seven-syllabic verse form of classical Chinese poetry, though with more loose rhyming patterns and more colloquial style probably due to the writers' lack of formal training in classical literature. As the Australian scholar Anne McLaren has noted, emerging from and responding to the dominant Confucian ideology of the late imperial period, the women's script "offers a private domain in which women inscribe formulae of fantasy and consolation, struggle and self-assertion, within a 'restricted linguistic code' of their own devising" (384).

Hahn cites lines from a *nü shu* poem translated by Carolyn Lei-Lanilau as an epigraph for her book Mosquito and Ant: "We cannot be polite and attentive enough / For your heart to feel briefly relieved and happy." It is likely that for Hahn the *nü shu* writing described in Lei-Lanilau's rather sketchy and sometimes imprecise introduction must be appealing especially because of its resemblance to the Japanese women's writing in the Heian period. Although created by women within two different historical settings and of distinct social classes in their respective cultures, *nü shu* writings and the literary works in vernacular Japanese in the Heian period exemplify how women could negotiate their limited space both for learning and creating within a patriarchal system. Inspired by this, Hahn published in Mosquito and Ant a series of epistolary poems written in the frame of *nü shu* correspondence. Like her earlier poems in Earshot, the poems here feature a woman speaker, who, having lost her *bungo*, often discusses the translingual, trans-historical experience of reading and writing. More often in the letters, however, the speaker confides to L., a mysterious woman correspondent who is proficient in classical Chinese languages, her hidden passions, her melancholy over her mother's death, and her

relationship with her husband and daughters. In the title poem “Mosquito and Ant,” Hahn’s speaker explicitly refers to the *nü shu* script that Chinese women invented:

I want my letters to resemble
tiny ants scrawled across this page.
 They spy a crumb of dark sugar
 on the far side of the embankment
and their strategy is simple:
the shortest distance between two points
is tenacity not seduction.

I want my letters to imitate
mosquitoes as they loop
around the earlobe with their noise:
the impossible task of slapping one
across its erratically slow travel.
Those spiderlike legs. The sheaths of wings.
The body that transports disease.
I wonder if a straight man can read such lines. (29-30)

Beginning with the phrase “I want,” the stanzas clearly echo lines appearing earlier in Earshot in the poem “Revolution”: “I want those words / that gave women de facto power” (17). Like the Heian women in Japanese history, the Chinese *nü shu* writers also found their own way of writing. The repetition of the syntactical pattern “I want...” in the poem makes evident a woman’s assertive attitude about her own writing, something which Hahn values in ancient Chinese women and wishes to express through her own writing. What is especially interesting about the passage is how Hahn quite unexpectedly teases out the empowering side of the seemingly negative evocations of the term “mosquito and ant.” Described as “mosquito and ant” by their initial male discoverers in the 1950s (Gong 23), the designation seems fraught with contemptuous connotations, emphasizing annoyance as well as small-ness and negligibility and probably even implying an aversion to it. The term nevertheless evokes a vivid image for Hahn’s speaker who would like to don the creative power of the ancient women and invent a

poetic language of her own. For her, the script is characterized by “tenacity” and an “impossibility” of dying. The female friendship suggested between the women correspondents renders the *nü shu* writings somewhat like the Sapphic epistolary writings. In fact, Hahn repeatedly draws parallels between the Japanese women writings of the Heian period and Sappho’s poems in The Narrow Road to the Interior where she explores in more detail the possibility of a comparative reading of Eastern and Western traditions.

Reinventing the Chinese tradition for her own poems in Mosquito and Ant, however, Hahn does not use the foreign element appropriatively but instead presents a sophisticated perception of the “other.” The book is divided into four sections, each titled with a Chinese character, respectively “言” for speaking, “女” for woman, “心” for heart, and “雨” for rain.⁴⁴ For a reader familiar with Chinese, the characters make clear the book’s purpose to express women’s hearts. For readers who do not speak Chinese or Japanese, Hahn, rather than providing ideographic explanations as she does with the Japanese *kanji* in Earshot, intentionally leaves the characters untranslated. In fact, the four selected characters not only function independently but also work as important basic radicals, each able to generate a long series of characters when combined with other radicals. In an interview with Francoise Luong, Hahn comments on the heteroglossia of Mosquito and Ant: “For those unacquainted with Chinese characters, I hope that my word play produces something startling and bewildering and beautiful. For those who are familiar, I hope my usage is a playful validation of non-Western culture inside American poetry (which of course is far from new).” Aware of previous uses of Chinese characters

⁴⁴ These words can also be read as Japanese *kanji* with the same meanings.

in the history of poetry in English, Hahn actually turns away from the Poundian tradition with deliberate untranslation and “playful” re-imagination.

Pound’s imagism has been shown to be greatly influenced by the American scholar Ernest Fenollosa’s notebooks on Chinese language and poetry. Fenollosa’s work The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry, with its sometimes rather oversimplified and inaccurate sketches of Chinese language, became a significant influence not only for Pound, but also for many twentieth-century American poets such as Charles Olson and Gary Snyder.⁴⁵ Pound’s famous poetic rewriting of classical Chinese poems in Cathay reveals the prominent role imagery plays in Chinese poetry. The recurring appearance of such images as “hairpins,” “petals,” “clouds,” and “crescent moon” in the Cathay poems and Pound’s other Chinese literature-influenced work partly defines what generations of Western poets and readers consider as the “essence” of Chinese poetry. In these poems, women are mostly anonymous “court ladies” or abandoned wives, heartbroken about their endless waiting for men. Pound’s poem “Fan-Piece, For Her Imperial Lord” and his translation “The Beautiful Toilet” are examples of poems which generate these tropes. Even when women’s voices are heard in some of the poems, such as “The Jewel Stairs’ Grievance” and the famous “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter,” their lives are dominated by their “lord,” and their voices always reveal a passive, weakened position that reflects on the hierarchy of genders. Even their complaints sound shy and repressed. Reading *nü shu* poems and other works by Chinese women poets, Hahn finds radically different female voices from those in Pound, voices in which familiar images seem able to take on new meanings. In “Orchid Root,” one of the

⁴⁵ For the analysis of Fenollosa, see the new critical edition of The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry ed by Saussy et al.

poems written as letters addressed to the woman friend L., the exotic images such as “orchid root” at the beginning of the poem soon lead to a self-reflective comment on the connotations of the images:

I need to return to the Chinese women poets.
The flat language
of pine and orchid.
The clouds playing over the crescent moon.
Return to the coy lines
that advertise and protest.
The words weighted in object
as much as flight. (57)

Hahn’s reference to the images is remarkable due to her emphasis on the “women poets.” Her description of their “flat language” and “coy lines” are especially ironic, considering the “coy” women figures in Poundian renderings. Underlying the superficial images, she suggests, may be an intention to “protest” and “object,” as well as a longing for “flight” and escape.

As if to further demonstrate this alternative way of reading familiar Chinese imagery, in the following part of the poem, two stereotypically imagistic passages are interrupted by subversive commentary. Chinese characters appear again. They are by no means simply picture-like ideographs, dehistoricized and idealized as a better medium for imagistic poetry writing. Instead, the Poundian rewriting of Chinese ideograms and classical Chinese images is further complicated by Hahn’s feminist reading of Chinese women’s writing.

iv.
Take—the anonymous courtesan
who wrote the lines:
My hairpins on your fallen jacket—
My stockings on the tiles—
My petals on your root—

v.
 The women write poems to one another
 to protest the man's inattention:
 and they fall in love
 consequently
 as the honeysuckle climbs the fence
 from one garden to the next
 its fragrance on the draft beneath the door.

vi.
 PINE 杉
 MAGPIE 鵲
 CLOUD 雲 (58)

Here one sees a list of images that frequently appear in Pound's Cathay poems: "hairpins," "petals," "pine," "magpie" and "cloud." Hahn continues to intervene in the conventional understanding of the images with a playful re-reading here. According to her, the women may actually write "to one another to protest the man's inattention." The female friendship built upon writing completely excludes men from their world and thus becomes a way of resisting patriarchal power. The image of honeysuckle works as a perfect metaphor for the *nü shu* writings between women, because its blossoms look like mosquitoes and its ability to "climb the fence / from one garden to the next" indicates a transgressive power. Recalling "fragrance" of the words in the Heian women's texts, the "fragrance" here again links the women in the two traditions. The structural differences between the stanzas are worth noting, too. While the simple imagistic catalogue of Stanza iv and Stanza vi recalls Pound's reworking of Chinese poems and his oversimplified reading of Chinese written language, the middle Stanza v foregrounds an image described and structured in a much more convoluted syntax, as if disrupting the tendency to overemphasize the imagistic feature of Chinese literature and the ideographic characteristic of Chinese language. More interestingly, the selection of the three Chinese

characters in Stanza iv. is worth considering with the diverse etymological structures they demonstrate. Two of the characters are formed with the combination of an ideographic radical and a phonetic part (the ideographic “木” and the phonetic “夕”; the ideographic “鳥” and the phonetic “昔”). The third character holds two ideographic components (“雨” and “云”). Again, Hahn does not provide any interpretation here—as she has done in Earshot. The three characters standing beside the English words leave the English-only reader “bewildered” with their complicated strokes. Later in the poem, the speaker tells us that she has located the characters in the Matthew’s Chinese-English Dictionary. As Rey Chow has made clear in her critique of Jacques Derrida, the essentialist view of Chinese writing as purely ideographic is oversimplifying and misleading because, with such a view, “*an entire language and culture [is] reduced to (sur)face, image, and ideogram*” (72 original emphasis). It is not clear whether Hahn intentionally chooses the structurally diverse Chinese characters here. Yet, in any case, Hahn imaginatively rewrites the images in classical Chinese texts through the lens of *nü shu*. She shows how women writers may lend different meaning to images used by men and how Chinese characters are more than dehistoricized, idealized ideograms reflecting nature; they are carriers of their own complex history involving both patriarchal oppression and the potential for subversive poetic creation.

Asian American critics Josephine Park and Steven G. Yao have both studied Pound’s engagement with Asian art as a trans-Pacific literary precedent that Asian American, particularly Chinese American, poetry “both build[s] upon and depart[s] from” (Yao “Toward a Prehistory” 152). Their readings of such Chinese American poets as Ho Hon Leung, Marilyn Chin, and John Yau show how the poets rewrite the Poundian

legacy in different ways as they seek an Asian American poetics of their own. Hahn's *nü shu* poems, with her untranslated Chinese ideograms and resignification of images, demonstrate a more direct, critical engagement with the Poundian tradition. Moreover, with a feminist intention of highlighting women's agency in writing, Hahn's work explores the dialogic potential of the liminal position of an Asian American woman writer.

Within its overall *nü shu* structure, Mosquito and Ant nevertheless is significantly marked with its references to another discourse, that of French feminism. Titled “雨” or rain, the last section, also the “Endnotes” of the book, is constituted of references to both East Asian women writings and the French feminist writings Hahn draws upon. The nurturing image of rain in classical Chinese poetry seems to be a perfect fit for Hahn's multiple sources of inspiration. In an interview with Eileen Tabios in 1996, Hahn talks about writing poems in response to her reading of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Catherine Clément, and Adrienne Rich: “I excerpted quotes from these writers to ‘talk back’ to them, hopefully engage with them deeply” (Tabios 24). A number of poems in Mosquito and Ant have their triggering lines from writings by Irigaray, Cixous, and Clément, figures closely associated with *l'écriture féminine*, the French feminist discourse that emphasizes writing as a means of resisting and subverting the repressive pattern of male-dominated writing and culture. Interestingly, the French term *l'écriture féminine* literally echoes the Chinese term “*Nü Shu*.” As can be seen in Cixous's texts that challenge the boundaries between theory and fiction, writers of *l'écriture féminine*, in seeking to write the female body, foreground an “openness” that exceeds fixed reasoning and strict patriarchal “logic.”

Since her early work, Hahn has been concerned with issues of the female voice and how to bring the “body” into the text. She says in a recent interview about her self-positioning as a woman writer in relation to Western literature: “I’m interested in bringing the female voice to the fore. I do wish to write from the body, from this female body. From the sacred and the scandalous, the luscious and the aging” (Interview with Sheck). Placing poems with references to this feminist discourse among her pieces inspired by Chinese *nü shu* writings and Japanese women writers of the Heian period, Hahn asks the reader to think about the possibility of a comparative feminist reading of women writings from different cultures and historical moments. Her short poem “Translating Ancient Lines into the Vernacular” is a telling case in point. It contains as a “triggering line” Clément’s words from The Newly Born Woman: “When the line is crossed, contagion is produced” (qtd in Hahn 101). Clément is talking about the “abnormal,” border-crossing behavior of the hysteric and the sorceress as acts of subversive potential. The metaphor of “contagion,” referring to the history of pathologizing the female other and criminalizing resistance, suggests a hidden yet empowering influence women may exert on each other through rebellious acts (Clément 34-35). Working on the “ancient lines” probably by ancient Chinese or Japanese women, Hahn’s speaker explicitly states, “I want to go where the hysteric resides” (41), leaving the reader to wonder whether she is deliberately representing a historical, subversive woman’s voice from East Asian tradition in the terms of twentieth-century French feminism. Is Hahn referring the “contagious” effect of ancient women’s writing, which elsewhere she describes as “an older sister lending me a lipstick” (45)? Or, is she,

ultimately, expressing her own desire to participate, through her transcultural poetry, in contemporary feminist discourse?

***Zuihitsu* and *Tanka*: Forms Untranslated**

The interplay between the different cultural sources that Hahn draws upon is more clearly shown in The Narrow Road to the Interior (2006). Here, she continues to engage passionately with the Japanese women writers of the Heian period, by experimenting across linguistic boundaries with the Japanese forms *zuihitsu* and *tanka*. For a long time, *haiku* has been considered perhaps *the* representative form of Japanese poetry, to a large extent due to its introduction by Pound, Amy Lowell, and other Imagist poets. Hahn's work rarely contains *haiku* pieces. Rather, her use of *zuihitsu* and *tanka*—both of which are important literary forms in classical Japanese literature and have a much longer history than *haiku*—reveals a different and more sophisticated view of Japanese literary culture. Based on this view, Hahn translates forms in such a way that allows the reader to experience the “other” forms with an immediacy that allows for the exploration of dialogic dynamics of transcultural writings.

Ever since her 1995 book The Unbearable Heart, every poetry collection of Hahn's has published contained pieces in *zuihitsu*, a classical Japanese prose form. It is a form that features random, fragmentary, diary-like, and loosely connected passages. The history of the form is full of uncertainties and ambiguities, as its development follows a journey from China to Japan and back to China again. The Japanese term *zuihitsu* is a transliteration of the Chinese literary term, *suibi* 随笔, literally meaning “following the brush.” It was first used in the twelfth century by Chinese scholar Hung Mai to refer to a

collection of his essays and notes on a variety of topics from poetics to medicine. Japanese writers might have become familiar with the form through the circulation of Hung's and other Chinese texts (Chance 55). The transliterated term *zuihitsu* was first used in Japan in the fifteenth century, although an earlier work in the Heian period, Sei Shōnagon's The Pillow Book written in vernacular Japanese, was retrospectively thought of as an early model of *zuihitsu* in Japanese literature (Chance 55-65).⁴⁶ A contemporary of the author of The Tale of Genji, Sei Shōnagon recorded in her essays her observations of and contemplations on the Heian Palace. Hahn is aware that the development of Japanese literary language was intricately entangled with the history of Chinese language and literature. As she has repeatedly mentioned in her poems, women's lack of access to Chinese language training ironically accelerated the popularity of Japanese as a literary language. She is particularly interested in how the "vernacular," or this "language of islands," was used in women's writings such as The Pillow Book and the intriguing form of *zuihitsu* used there.

If her earlier engagement with The Tale of Genji marks her critique of the repression of female agency in translation, her exploration of *zuihitsu* helps her find a means of foregrounding female voices. In the last poem in the book Mosquito and Ant, titled "Sewing without Mother: a *zuihitsu* for my sister," Hahn has talked briefly about this "formless" form as an "anti-structure" (96), foreshadowing her further experimentation in The Narrow Road to the Interior. Borrowing the title of Matsuo Bashō's famous travel journal, The Narrow Road to the Interior is a book of self-

⁴⁶ Ironically, the term and the meandering prose or prose-poetry form it defines did not gain as much attention in Chinese literature as in Japanese literature, and it was re-introduced to Chinese mostly as a Japanese form by several famous writers and translators' efforts in the earlier twentieth century, a time when Chinese intellectuals tried to modernize Chinese literary language.

exploration of the poet's "interior" world.⁴⁷ Continuing her *nü shu*-inspired correspondence with L. in Mosquito and Ant, the opening poem "Compass (an introduction)" is a letter to L., which intends to give a "compass" to L. as she navigates the *zuihitsu* form. While seeking out a definition of the form in books on Japanese literature, the speaker cannot find anything illuminating, for none of the existing explanations precisely describes the "sense of disorder that feels so integral" to the form itself (3). She goes on to quote three descriptions of the form and then lists a series of problems these descriptions pose for scholars and translators of Japanese literature. Her manner here is very much reminiscent of her manner of treating the different translations of The Tale of Genji in her early poem "Comp. lit.":

[L]iterally, "following [the impulses of] the brush," and consisting of brief essays on random topics

--Donald Keene, *Seeds in*

the Heart

[Miscellany] ... partly of reminiscence, partly of entries in diary-form

--Arthur Waley, *The Pillow*

Book

[S]tray notes, expressing random thoughts in a casual manner

--Makoto Ueda, *Principles of Classical Japanese Literature*, Earl Miner, ed.

Notice that none conveys the tonal insistence a writer finds her/himself in. None suggests an organizing principle—what we might call a *theme*. None comments on structural variety—list, diary, commentary, essay, poem. Fragment.

None offers that a sense of disorder might be artfully ordered by fragmenting, juxtaposing [...] (3)

⁴⁷ Bashō's book was written in written in *haibun*, a form that combines short prose passages with haiku (Hamill x). Hahn is obviously more interested in the book's idea of the journey, both literal and metaphorical, than Bashō's form. Fred Wah, the Chinese Canadian poet I will study in Chapter 3, is deeply interested in *haibun*. I will discuss in detail his use of this form in his transnational poetry.

The speaker's critiques go on for several paragraphs. Beginning her critical views repeatedly with the word "none" conveys a strong sense of dissatisfaction. In the early poem "Comp. Lit." Hahn's speaker critiques the two translations of The Tale of Genji mainly by asking questions. The critical force is often weakened by occasional self-doubt. Here in The Narrow Road to the Interior, her critique of inadequate interpretations of a Japanese form is far more straightforward. Her own concept of the form as "disorder artfully ordered" is assertively expressed through the critique. Toward the end of the piece, the speaker unabashedly expresses her intention to fully embrace the formless *zuihitsu*: "Okay—for me, that the *zuihitsu* feels *encompassing*. That a fragment might be synecdoche, or excerpt. Or scrap. (Sappho comes to mind.) Why not!" (4) The sentence fragments, charged with a strong determination and excitement, provide a clear preface to what the book will unfold: a vastly "encompassing" feminist poetic with rich cross-cultural references. Rather than further theorizing the form or retranslating the Japanese texts, Hahn re-presents the form by actually writing in it. She, thereby, attempts not only to demonstrate the empowering inspiration of the Japanese women writers' *zuihitsu* but also to undo the previous interpreters' rather general and oversimplified emphasis on "randomness" or "disorder."

Hahn's *zuihitsu* in this collection appear to be long prose pieces, consisting of apparently fragmented, disparate paragraphs and perfectly illustrating the genre name "following the brush." Some of them include short poems, and others have embedded in them journal entries or email messages. Not too concerned about how to categorize the form—whether it is prose or poetry—Hahn welcomes the potential of prose paragraphs that the form enables, as she claims that "paragraphs absorb the emotionality differently

than lineated poems” (Narrow Road 50). Indeed, allowing room for distraction and fragmentation, the form makes possible a multi-dimensional writing with rich historical annotations. It provides Hahn with ample space for fully exploring emotions and for engaging women’s writing in different historical and cultural contexts. In “Pulse and Impulse,” a *zuihitsu* piece consisting of a series of journal entries, for example, the speaker’s reflection on the Japanese form is intricately woven with her contemplation about women poets in the Euro-American tradition. At the same time, a narrative focused on her own body runs throughout the work. A list of American women poets—“Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, H. D” —appears early in the poem and seems meant to be read in comparison with another list of women writers in classical Japanese literature: “Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shōnagon, Ono no Komachi, Lady Ise” (47-48). Just as in the book’s opening piece, here Lady Murasaki and Sei Shōnagon’s *zuihitsu* reminds the speaker of Sappho once more:

That [*zuihitsu*] was cultivated by a woman and feels significant—as a writing space for women. It is by its own nature a fragmented anything. I love long erratic pieces into which I can thrash around—make a mess. Lose the intellect.

Begin with your own fleshy body to seek fragments that will sustain.

I think of what we are left of Sappho’s work—so ravaged by patriarchal flames yet still enduring. Endearing. (49)

Although Hahn seems to simply draw a cross-cultural connection between Japanese and Western women writings and contrasting “body” and “the intellect” here, throughout the poem, Hahn tries to call attention to the complicated dialogism between body and mind, East and West.

Early in the poem, the speaker quotes Louise Glück’s poem “Circe’s Power” published from Meadowlands (1996): “I’m sick of your world / that lets the outside

disguise the inside” (47). Glück’s poem gives voice to Circe, the demanding, seductive, and dangerous sorceress in Homer’s Odyssey who transformed Odysseus’s men into pigs. Glück follows the tradition established by such women poets as Augusta Webster of the Victorian period in rewriting Circe and making her defend herself by saying that men are pigs anyway and all she does is to uncover their disguise. Not just foregrounding female voice and agency, Glück’s poem presents a female figure with a highly analytical mind and impressive negotiating power. She knows how to make clear her indisputable authority through language and at the same time saves the pride of her male listener. After assertively declaring her hatred for men’s deceptiveness by saying, “I’m sick of your world / that lets the outside disguise the inside,” she tells Odysseus that his men “weren’t bad men” but just turned greedy by “undisciplined life” (37). Then, in a hilarious comment— “As pigs / under the care of / me and my ladies, they / sweetened right up”—the men are shown as completely subjected to her controlling power (37). More interestingly, Glück ends Circe’s monologue with a passage that demonstrates what Joanne Diehl calls “a *realpolitik* of desire” (Diehl 10):

You think

a few tears upset me? My friend,
every sorceress is
a pragmatist at heart; nobody
sees essence who can’t
face limitation. If I wanted only to hold you

I could hold you prisoner. (Glück 38)

Glück’s Circe is quite the opposite of that with which women are traditionally associated. With an ironic, playful, and extremely confident voice, she is almost a masculine figure, immune to tears and capable of pragmatic thinking.

Hahn, too, is concerned with how to foreground the female voice in writing; one of the things that make Japanese Heian women's writing attractive to her is the "clear voice" shown in their texts (49). However, her intertextual references to Glück and the Heian women writers make visible two different ways of exploring the female voice. While Glück's subversive portrait of Circe moves the focus away from the woman's body to her mind, one that is analytical and rational enough to compete with men, the classical Japanese women's texts, as Hahn's speaker tries to show, demonstrate how empowering and liberating the writing based on the female body paradoxically can be with their daringly erotic subject matter and the embodied aesthetics of their style. With the reference to the Heian women, Hahn's speaker proposes a positive way of looking at "those traits women have been assigned, usually with negative connotations: subjectivity, intuition, irrationality (what short essays or lack of a formal structure might suggest)" (49). She expresses a determination to hold onto her own point of view as a woman, in the strong, rebellious rhetorical question, "What is wrong with subjectivity anyway?" (49). Reconsidering these "traits," however, Hahn is not reducing the idea of the female voice to an essentialized view of femininity and feminine writing. Rather, she invites the reader to think together with her about how to reconsider the relationship between body and intellect, or in her own words, how "to invite the intellect back in for re-vision" (49). The poem, after all, is about the speaker's thoughts about her own body as well. In the narrative about her worrying over a problematic gynecological test result, the speaker discovers that none of her female friends feels comfortable talking about gynecological problems. To her surprise and frustration, she finds that "because [a virus] isn't something lethal to men perhaps there is little publicity—and a lot of shame" (50). The

speaker's narrative urges the reader to consider what the sense of shame associated with the female body and its disease indicates about women's self-identity and their conception of gender.

Toward the end of the poem, Hahn rephrases Glück: "Not just the outside or inside" (51). There she suggests a notion of writing that does include a complementary—rather than mutually exclusive—relationship between body and mind. To "begin with your own fleshy body," for her, indicates a way to "seek words and a poetic" (47). She intends to write about the female body as an important site of discursive exploration, as Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price argue about contemporary feminist discourse on the body, "not in the hope of recovering an authentic female body unburdened of patriarchal assumptions, but in the full acknowledgement of the multiple and fluid possibilities of differential embodiment" (11). What the reader sees in Hahn's cross-cultural piece "Pulse and Impulse," then, is not a celebration of some "universal" feminist writing but a display of different-yet-related ways of (dis-)engaging with the female body in exploring the female voice. Glück's rewriting of Circe, the Heian women's intuitive, spontaneous record of their life, and the female speaker's thinking about her own body in the contemporary Western context are brought into interplay through Hahn's use of the *zuihitsu* form, a form which provides a space of comparison for each other. Untranslated from the interpretations by translators and scholars of Japanese literature, the form is shown, indeed, to be an "encompassing" one, allowing limitless connections to multiple literary and cultural traditions.

In The Narrow Road to the Interior, Hahn includes a number of poems in the Japanese form *tanka* as well. Characterized by succinctly depicted imagery, the *tanka*

pieces leave a great deal of blank space on the page, visually in contrast to the filled pages of the *zuihitsu*. If the ample space that *zuihitsu* provides allows expansive intertextual references and ambitious collages, the limited length of *tanka* forces a crystallized realization of poetic power. The short form becomes a way for Hahn to write about moments of daily life and the enlightenment of seemingly mundane observations. Alternating the two forms, Hahn creates a textual tension in the book between printing and space, language and silence. Yet at the same time, the book is not so much about tension as about ambiguity, the difficulty of distinguishing or separating out the supposed opposites of a dichotomy. The sentence fragments and the interrupting dashes recurring in the long *zuihitsu* pieces repeatedly reveal an intention to suggest rather than to tell, which is precisely what the brief *tanka* poems try to do.

Just as Hahn's deployment of *zuihitsu* reveals an attempt to undo the existing interpretations of the form, so does her use of *tanka* involve an effort to intervene in the misrepresentation of a Japanese literary form. The word *tanka* is the transliteration of the Japanese phrase 短歌, literally short verse. It refers to a classical verse form written in thirty-one Japanese syllables. Without any concept of rhyme or line, it was traditionally written in a "mono-linear form" composed of "units" and "phrases" (Sato 356). In translation into Western languages in the early twentieth century and in its later modern transformation, *tanka* takes on the appearance of a Western poem, divided into five lines in a syllable pattern of five-seven-five-seven-seven, with every unit becoming a separate line (Sato 347-350). The Japanese poet and translator Hiroaki Sato has criticized Arthur Waley's and others' appropriative way of translating classical *tanka* without much attention to its original formal characteristics. Inspired by Sato's translation of *tanka*

poems, Hahn's *tanka* series are written to restore the original structure and style of the verse form. "Although I have not maintained the [syllabic] count," she says in the endnotes for The Narrow Road to the Interior, "I have attempted brevity, the original convention of rendering each as a single line, and the use of seasonal/nature references" (107). Her *tanka* verse, echoing Sato's critique of dominating *tanka* translations and his restorative translations, tries to undo the assimilationist rendering of the form and explores the possibility of writing English poems in the untranslated, original "mono-linear" form. Hahn titles one *tanka* series, for example, "Conspiring with Shikishi." It is a series of one-line poems written in response to the poems of Princess Shikishi. Poring over the same images of "moon" or "autumn" as does the twelfth-century Japanese woman poet, Hahn's speaker uses the idea of "conspiring," again to suggest her identification with ancient women writers who tried to construct a creative space of their own even in the face of constrictive social forces.

Hahn's continuous exploration of the issue of "translation" through her engagement of East Asian traditions in poetry writing calls attention to a way of studying Asian American literature in relation to Asian literature, a vision now shared by many Asian American literary critics. For instance, Kandice Chuh in promoting a transnational Asian American study has argued that "Asian Americanist studies is a nodal point not only in studies of U.S. Americanness, but in those of Asianness, as well," and that "to defy the conventions of U.S. hegemonic epistemology, it is necessary to amplify purposefully the cross-geographic, cross-historical, and cross-discursive dynamics between Asianness and Asian Americanness in the critical methods of knowledge

production” (293). Chu’s argument comes from an expanding critical discourse on transnational Asian American studies, which has increasingly explored the possibilities and impact of studying Asian American texts at the intersection of Asian American studies and Asian studies. Hahn’s poetry provides an intriguing case in point. Her poetry not only participates in the discourse of translation studies through her critique of existing translation texts but explores possibilities of transcultural writing through practices of “retranslation” and “untranslation.” Hahn’s texts of “continental drift” demonstrate a poetics that enables a critical comparative reading of diverse cultural traditions and points the way to a transcultural feminist writing.

Chapter Three “Faking It”: Fred Wah’s Performative Language

A highly accomplished poet of both European and Chinese ancestry, Fred Wah has published numerous verse collections and critical essays in Canada since the 1960s. Early on in his career, he wrote mostly about the Kootenay region he grew up in and developed a speech-based poetic style influenced by Charles Olson’s “projective verse.” Since the publication of Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh at the end of the 1970s, he has been more interested in themes commonly explored by Asian North American and other ethnic writers, themes which include race, ethnicity, and what exactly “ethnic writing” means. The trajectory of his development challenges his critics. As Jeff Derksen has noted, for a long time Wah was identified primarily as a member of the avant-garde *Tish* writers under the influence of American poetry (*Tish* is a poetry newsletter Wah co-founded in the 1960s), and his writings about his racially and culturally hybrid family background were largely ignored (63, 70). Not until the past twenty years in the context of increasing interest in multiculturalism, have many critics begun attending to Wah’s “ethnic” writings. Some critics, interested in the topic of mixed race identity in his prize-winning and also most popular books Waiting for Saskatchewan (1985) and Diamond Grill (1996), ignore his earlier books of the 1960s and the 1970s,⁴⁸ and others, aware of his earlier achievement and his overall commitment to formal innovation, try to bridge

⁴⁸ See Davey 29, for a mention of the problem. In criticism on Wah in the past few years, one finds numerous essays on Diamond Grill and other “biotexts” (see Sugars, for example) but seldom does one encounter writings on his formal experimentation.

the different stages of his writing by looking for ways to include his entire oeuvre into the “ethnic” paradigm and often exaggerate their conclusions.⁴⁹ Critics have yet to read Wah’s work as a whole.

The difficulty in reconciling the apparent gap between Wah’s avant-garde form and his exploration of ethnic and racial identity, between his early and later writing, recalls some fundamental questions regarding “ethnic” poets: do we read “Asian North American poetry” somehow differently from “American poetry” or “Canadian poetry”? What effects can formal innovation have on the discussion of race and identity? These questions bring to mind the debate about experimental writing and minority writers following the Language poet Ron Silliman’s 1988 essay “Poetry and the Politics of the Subject,” in which he dismisses women, gay, and ethnic minority poets from the tracks of formally experimental poetry by arguing that they “have a manifest political need to have their stories told” and therefore should adopt a more conventional style (63). Among the many critical responses to Silliman, that of poet and critic Harryette Mullen is highly relevant here. In the 2002 essay “Poetry and Identity,” she calls into question the critical categorization of her early poems as falling “within the category of ‘representative blackness’” and that of her later work as “formally innovative” as if the two categories were mutually exclusive (28).

The problem Mullen complains of in the reception of her work precisely describes the problem plaguing critical responses to Wah. As Brian Kim Stefans and Iyko Day, following Derksen, have both recognized, Wah as a formally experimental ethnic poet presents a dilemma for critics who expect only social realism and a politics of resistance

⁴⁹ See Cabri 86, for a brief criticism of this tendency to “anachronistically rewrite Wah’s historical and poetical trajectory.”

familiar in more conventional forms of ethnic writing, on the one hand, and a way of reading informed by the philosophy of deconstruction which often focuses on white avant-garde poets, on the other (Day “Interventing Innocence” 37). To separate Wah’s style and his view of language from his concerns with issues of ethnicity, and to prioritize either side, can only produce a misleadingly incomplete reading. Though pointing out the problem, Stefans and Day have not provided a clear framework in which to read Wah’s work as a whole, nor have they done much close analysis of Wah’s poems.⁵⁰ The question is whether or not there is a path through Wah’s varying oeuvre at all. I argue that the seemingly diverse directions Wah’s poems take are fundamentally connected through a performative notion of language. These directions together contribute to his unique poetics of “faking it,” a poetics that interrogates the usual ways in which language works in defining racial and ethnic identity and explores the potential of language in transforming the problems of dominant discourses on race. Drawing on Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler’s theories of the performative, my reading of Wah’s poems from different stages of his career analyzes his performative language, through which he seeks the possibilities of oppositional performativity. Suggesting a deconstructionist view of language that takes the relationship between the signifier and the signified as fundamentally unstable and dynamic, Wah’s writing constantly reflects on the materiality of language. His poems enact a self-interrogation that produces a reconsideration of notions of ethnicity and so-called “ethnic writing.” His experimental forms, which challenge traditional ways of reading for “meaning,” work as effective tools for resisting the common habit of emphasizing the “other-ness” of ethnic writers.

⁵⁰ Stefans provides a general introduction to several avant-garde Asian North American poets, including Wah. He talks about a few collections of Wah’s collections very briefly. Day reads only one poem by Wah after a brilliant analysis of the critical discourse around Asian North American avant-garde literature.

“Faking It”

The idea of “faking it” has been crucial for Wah’s development as a poet. The terms “faking it” and “making it up” recur in his writings and indicate a deep belief in the inventive, performative potential of language. In an essay first written in 1992 titled “Faking It,” Wah tells the story of how the idea of “faking it” comes from his father who, born to a Chinese father and a white mother in Canada, was sent back to China to grow up away from his parents. Returning to Canada as a young man, Wah’s father experienced a particular sense of displacement and re-adjustment as a mixed race “immigrant.” He developed an ingenious ability of inventing jokes about Chinese immigrants’ use of the English language: once, during his inaugural speech for joining an all-white business club, he covered a slip of tongue in which he said “sloup” instead of “soup” by improvising a self-deprecating joke. “Chinamen,” he said, were always calling soup “sloup” because they made café soup from slop water and liked to “slurp” their soup (Faking It 13). “So he faked it,” Wah concludes about his father. “Faking it” also applies to Wah’s own experience as an English major in college, a time in which he was conscious of his mixed race background, his status as the offspring of a Eurasian father and a Swedish-Canadian mother:

and I guess I picked up on that sense of faking it from him, that English could be faked, and I quickly learned that when you fake language you see everything else is fake.

[...]

But the more I wrote the more I discovered that faking it is a continual theatre of necessity. No other way to be in language, but to bluff your way through it, stalling for more time. And when I get it, that little gap of renewal, I see the accent not in my own little voice, but there in the mouth of the word within the word ... right there at the tips of our fingers, in the ‘sniff’ of the pen as it hunts the page. (13-16)

However playful and successful it appears, the father's performance inevitably suggests a racial anxiety about the existence of a language and identity more "authentic" or "pure" than his own. As language is a defining aspect of identity, performing according to its arbitrary, majority-determined rules seems to be a prerequisite for one's recognition by the dominant group. If his father's goal is to assimilate into the white-centered society, does his performing actually reinforce white privilege and his own subjection to power? Or, is the joke, with its playful invention of new words, also an intervention in the English language and therefore a subversion of the dominant racial order? How is Wah's own performance of language in writing similar to or different from his father's, and what impact can his performance make? Wah's poems reflect on these questions, as they challenge conventional phrasing and syntax and explore the performativity of language. Playing with language, he goes further than his father by exploring mixed race identity in writing and seeking the creative and subversive possibilities this identity might bring.

Wah's notion of "faking it" also comes from his enthusiasm for jazz. As Wah explains in a recent interview with Susan Rudy, in jazz, to "fake" means to improvise, and improvisation plays an important role in jazz performance ("Hybridity and Asianicity" 158). The jazz musician's "fake book" is a collection of melodies on which s/he can improvise and recreate an existing melody anew. Interestingly, while the jazz musician's improvisation based on the fake book is grounded in convention, or prearranged patterns, Wah's poetic writing resists "convention" at a more fundamental level, as he experiments with words and syntax and challenges readers' expectation of a clear speaking subject. His poetry, in a spontaneous language replete with witty turns of phrases recalling his father's "sloup," foregrounds the medium, the language itself.

Writing, for him, is a process of “discovering what [he] know[s] through language” (“Hybridity and Asianicity” 159). It requires readers to work with him on the language and thus to make “mean” possible (“Hybridity and Asianicity” 159). His interest in the fake book recalls what Maxine Hong Kingston does in her 1990 novel Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book. Kingston, too, is inspired by the fake book through which she foregrounds a language that seeks to generate and create itself. She says in an interview: “I want to write a prose book similar in a way to those music fake books. I give many basic melodies. I tell people ideas for more books [...]. they can improvise from those basic plots and they can finish the stories for me” (qtd. In Maini 258). For Kingston, as for Wah, the audience is also composed of “musicians,” collaborating with the author in the exploration in language. However, while Kingston’s apparently comic text is driven by her main character Wittman Ah Sing’s ambitious, often stream-of-consciousness voice about his artistic creations characterized by wildness and exuberance, Wah’s funny and subtly thought-provoking language reveals its performativity with deceptive simplicity, even blandness.

To analyze Wah’s development of performative language, it may be useful to first review the notion of the performative theorized by Jacques Derrida and other poststructuralists. Traced to J. L. Austin’s speech act theory, “performative” refers to “utterances that accomplish, in their very enunciation, an action that generates effects” (Parker and Sedgwick 3). Derrida, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and others develop this concept and point out the nonreferential features of the performative speech act. In other words, their deconstructive reading of texts emphasize severing the taken-for-granted link between the signifier and the world, between “the meaning and the performance of any

text”—to use de Man’s term. Derrida, in particular, further argues for the iterability of language in his comment on Austin’s theory. For Derrida, every speech act functions as a citation or repetition of previously used words or structures, hence its “iterability,” though old meanings may be altered by new contexts (“Signature Event Context” 315-317). In Austin’s theory, he finds an irresolvable problem: it is impossible to fully distinguish the performative from the constative, or the declarative utterance that asserts something that is true or false (“Signature Event Context” 325, “Psyche” 13). Derrida suggests, instead, that every speech act has a performative dimension because it always reproduces and adds something new to the existing language through citation and repetition in new contexts, for a new audience, for new purposes. In the essay “Psyche: Invention of the Other,” Derrida demonstrates how a text can deconstruct the distinction between the constative and the performative as well as that of self and other.⁵¹ He defines a “poetic performative” in reading a short poem by Francis Ponge, which is composed of an apparently constative description. Opening with a self-referential statement, “*With the word with begins then this text,*” Ponge’s poem goes on to its narrative center about a woman decidedly breaking a mirror after seven years’ misfortune (qtd. in Derrida 8). The breaking of the mirror provides an image of deconstructing the self-other distinction and also echoes the poem’s self-reflexive performance and its collapse with its descriptive tendencies. In Derrida’s words, the poem “simultaneously *describes and carries out* [...] its own generation” (11 original italics). This double mode in turn makes difficult distinguishing “the telling and the told faces of the sentence,” a sentence that “invents itself while inventing the tale of its invention” (11). This poetic

⁵¹ The reference to this essay by Derrida here is inspired by Koh’s discussion of it in an essay on Asian Canadian visual artists. See Koh 153-154.

performative not only tells a story; it also enables the reader to see how a text evolves. In so doing, the performative can actually “disturb the norms, the statutes, and the rules” of language (11-13).

Like theorists of deconstruction, Wah raises doubts about the direct linkage between the signifier and the world as well. In the introduction to his collection of critical essays published in 2000, Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity, he says, “As a poet who’s never trusted meaning and its prior constructions, I also find it necessary and useful to sometimes fake language. This action is not so much fraudulent as generative” (Faking It 1). To “fake language” as a “generative” practice, in this sense, echoes the poststructuralist definition of performative language that emphasizes the capacity of language to make things happen. As my close analysis of Wah’s poems will show, “faking it” represents his conscious effort to invent a poetic language of his own. Concepts such as “home,” “origin,” and “ethnic” are examined and problematized in his inventive syntax and poetic forms. In the new contexts he creates for them, the words reach beyond their usually constative sphere. They draw attention to how they are used here and elsewhere and thus provoke thinking about the social and historical contexts in which discourses on race and ethnicity are produced. Rather than finding the “meaning” of the words and sentences, Wah’s poems have a stronger interest both in showing *how* the “meaning” is produced and accepted and in questioning the taken-for-granted process of meaning-making.

In discussing Ponge’s performative use of mirror images, Derrida is not concerned with the binary politics of self-other in any particular social or political context. His analysis of performative language remains within a linguistic sphere, although his reference to the mythic figure Psyche suggests the historical and cultural dimensions of

ancient Greece which problematically stand in for a somewhat universalized notion of language. Reading Wah's performative language, however, one inevitably notes that Wah's thinking about the performativity of language is profoundly intertwined with social concerns. Language, for Wah, is inextricably connected to other aspects of social life: he does not merely see "faking it" in language but in "everything else" (Faking It 14), among which racial and ethnic identity is a major concern. His "faking it" also involves an intention to interrogate the limiting prescriptions of racial and ethnic categories. Acknowledging his own minority status, Wah's suggestion of writing with an "accent" ("I see the accent not in my own little voice, but there in the mouth of the word within the word ... in the 'sniff' of the pen as it hunts the page") explores the possibilities of performing with his particular voice, the voice of an ethnic minority (Faking It 16). Invoking his father's "sloup," seen in this light, provokes more thinking about the white-dominated setting in which the performance takes place. In this sense, his idea of "faking it," or the emphasis on the performative, comes closer to Judith Butler's development of Derrida's "iterability" of language and her theorizing of the performative in social contexts. Butler argues that gender is performative, or produced through reiterative bodily acts that usually accommodate prevailing gender norms, proper and improper masculinity and femininity. Gender is therefore socially contingent rather than being either an "internal" or universal feature of ourselves. The theory of performativity facilitates the transformation of normative gender presumptions. Butler's discussion of drag in Gender Trouble reveals how unstable the taken-for-granted "reality" can be, and how a performative act may subvert and transform restrictive norms (xxii-xxiii, 175-176). In her later book Excitable Speech, Butler takes aim at legal attempts at censorship,

arguing for the agency of performative language and the possibility of subversive appropriation of dominant social discourses.

Wah is interested in the agency at the heart of this ambivalent site of performativity and extends Butler's gender theory into his exploration of racial and ethnic identities. He quotes a passage from Excitable Speech in an essay on ethnic writers' stylistic choices:

Thus, there is an ambiguity of agency at the site of this decision. . . . One decides on the condition of an already decided field of language, but this repetition does not constitute the decision of the speaking subject as a redundancy. The gap between redundancy and repetition is the space of agency. (qtd. in Faking It 124).

Butler is talking about an author's agency in making linguistic decisions within the constraints of censorship. Wah finds the discussion relevant to thinking about ethnic writers' stylistic choices between the "more accessible conventions of the lyric" and innovative "avant-garde poetics" (123-124). For him, the ethnic poet has to negotiate his or her voice in the face of questions such as whether lyric conventions produce certain modes of censorship that affect a poet's writing, whether the ethnic poet has the same agency in choosing forms as a white poet, and whether defying formal conventions necessarily represents a political subversion. Wah does not give direct answers to these questions in the essay, but his oeuvre makes evident his own linguistic choices. Based on his earlier experimentation especially in his poems since the 1980s, his idea of "faking it" has emphasized a kind of oppositional performativity. Through experimental re-rendering of words and transforming of conventional syntax, his work exposes the racial and ethnic identities as socially constructed. As the following analysis of his poems will show, he seeks the possibility of reconceptualizing "ethnicity" in a more liberating way by

questioning the usual meaning of such terms as “faking,” “purity,” and “home” and by creating a new poetic language through his inventive use of those terms.

“Writing is sometimes remembering this image, and sometimes it has to make it up”

In the afterword for Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek, a collection of his early writings published in 1980, Wah says: “Oaxaca, Vancouver, the Kootenay River a thousand years ago or today, my father’s father’s birthplace, become ‘local’ to me and compound to make up a picture of a world I am native of. Writing is sometimes remembering this image, and sometimes it has to make it up” (Loki 126). Interestingly, the grand view of the world in this passage vaguely predicts his later concerns that extend from the Kootenay regions to China, the home of his paternal grandfather. Also worth noting here is that his first attempt at a performative poetics lies in this early effort not to merely represent an image (“remembering”) but to invent a form that gestures beyond language’s mimetic rendering of reality (“make it up”). The exploration forms the basis for his later development, yet the absence of social concerns in his writing of this period seems to have weakened the efficacy of this performative language and limited its impact on the reader. After all, how is the world, particularly his “father’s father’s place” on the other side of the earth, related to the Kootenay mountains he grows up in, and why do all these places matter? To study this interesting yet somewhat problematic first step of Wah’s, it is necessary to begin with Charles Olson’s influence on Wah, as it is Olson’s approach that inspired him to write about his native place as a starting point.

It is commonly known that Wah began his study with Olson in his undergraduate years in the 1960s while the poet visited Canada, and that afterward he also studied with

Olson as a graduate student of linguistics at Buffalo. Criticism of Wah's poetry, however, has never articulated what exactly in Olson has influenced Wah's writing or how this influence relates to the development of his later poetics. Harold Bloom's theory of "anxiety of influence," which reads literary history through a Freudian psychoanalytical model, has lent a pessimistic coloring to the term "influence." Younger poets, in this theory, cannot escape the fate of simply rewriting, revising, or misinterpreting works by great authors and therefore are always subject to an anxiety of influence, under which original writing seems hardly possible. Yet, recent studies of intertextuality and artistic quotation have made clear how pleasurable and empowering "influence" can be. Mieke Bal, in her work of art criticism Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History, investigates contemporary appropriation or "quotation" of the seventeenth-century Baroque artist Caravaggio and shows how "influence" and intertextual references allow us to see the old masters anew. Quoting Bal, Patricia Yaeger in the editor's column in a recent issue of PMLA examines several types of intertextuality in contemporary literature and art including "citation as ornament, textuality as fold, [...] ghostly and unread citation" (437), all of which provide a source of intellectual pleasure, or "bliss," for readers. With their different emphases and perspectives, Bal's and Yaeger's studies have rehabilitated "influence." Wah's inheritance and development of the Olsonian form of "projective verse" also demonstrates a similar kind of vital influence: its empowering effect gives Wah's writing its initial shape and requires that his readers not only examine his poems but undertake a review of his literary predecessor in order to understand the fundamental concerns of his text.

Browsing Wah's early poems in Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek, one finds a style similar to Olson's open form, which features plain speech language, a strong sense of spontaneity and mixtures of one-syllabic, emphatic lines with sprawling run-on sentences. According to his doctrines about "projective verse," Olson takes a poem as energy transferred from the poet to the reader and believes that "form," as he famously quoted Creeley, "is never more than an extension of content" (16).

to dream takes no effort
to think is easy
to act is more difficult

but for a man to act after he has taken thought, this!
Is the most difficult thing of all (23)

With lines like these from his famous poem "The Kingfishers," Olson wants to call the reader's attention to the space within and between the lines as much as to the words. In illustration of these lines, he writes in "Projective Verse," "If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time" (22). Moreover, although he does not say so, his use of space here renders the lines as a flight of stairs, a visible progression of the thought. Moments similar to this appear frequently in Wah's early poems as well. For example, the pattern of indenting lines precisely illustrates the movement he aims to describe in this poem from one of his earliest volumes, Mountain, first published in 1967:

go in
go in the flaming base
sink in the skins of the Mountain's earth
along the road
far from the road
in gravel (Loki 30)

Space, finding its way to Wah's later poems as well, is used in various ways for its effect on line structure or page layout. In fact, Wah does not experiment with form merely as a way to "extend" or reinforce the content as Olson prescribes; his poems, especially later in his career, often provoke us to think about how form itself, rather than being secondary to content, plays a major part in carrying out the poet's aesthetics and politics.

Olson's persistent effort to grasp the meaning of language as a concept as well as his emphasis on speech is a powerful influence upon Wah's early work, which involves a similar effort to explore writing in avant-garde poetic language but a rather different vision of experience from that of Olson. In his poems as well as critical essays, Olson always accentuates the aural aspect of the poem; speech for him is the most fundamental resource for rhythm, and he believes that "speech as a communicator is prior to the individual and is picked up as soon as and with ma's milk" (27).⁵² He celebrates voice and breathing as important parts of speaking, and the emphasis he puts on the "breath" in the poem reveals his meticulous attention to what powers speech. On the other hand, writing is a performative act for him too. He criticizes the logocentric and phonocentric tradition of the West. Like Ezra Pound, he became fascinated with ideograms after reading Ernest Fenollosa's Japanese translations. He studied and looked for poetic inspiration in Mayan glyphs as enthusiastically as Pound did Chinese script. Joseph Riddel finds a deconstructive potential in Olson's poetics, which ultimately defines poetry as an articulation of culture, and "a mapping of transactions, its project [...] revisionary and not representational" (144). Following Olson, Wah's early writing is

⁵² The words are taken from Olson's letter to Elaine Feinstein, published in *Selected Writings* immediately after the famous essay "Projective Verse." See Olson, 27. In his interview with Davey, Wah said Olson's idea in this letter has a greater influence on him than the essay "Projective Verse" does. See Wah "Meandering Interview" 99.

largely “speech-based.” Wah says in his email to the author on October 18, 2008, “My early writing is definitely speech-based or, more exactly, acoustically based, since I shifted from music to poetry and my interest in linguistics was initially phonetic. [...] My writing from the mid-70’s was, of course, more informed by the ‘material’ aspects of writing brought to the fore by the Language poets.” Like Olson, he too became enthusiastic about Pound and Fenellosa’s introduction to ideograms. His 1975 collection Pictograms from the Interior of BC consists of a series of short poems in response to native rock paintings.

However, it was Olson’s persistent sense of place, with his particular focus on Gloucester, Massachusetts, that influenced Wah’s early work most powerfully.⁵³ Olson led Wah to concentrate on the mountainous Kootenay region of British Columbia for the focus of most of his student’s early poems. With a strong criticism of American politics, Olson’s epic work Maximus takes himself backward in order to proceed forward: he pursues a mythic past in the glyphs, constructing a Gloucester as his ideal “polis.” Concentrating on the Kootenay landscape in the 1970s, Wah adventurously experimented with language about the natural environment with which he was familiar, increasingly aware of his interest in the materiality of language and the possibilities it brings. For him, the materiality of language refers to issues regarding “syllable, phoneme, word, intonation pattern, morphology, sentence, notation, and so forth;” he thinks that “materiality frequently becomes transparent under the tyranny of other features like the poetic lyric ‘I’ or fictional narrative forms like the novel” (email to the author on November 18, 2008). Reading aloud his poems in this period takes effort. For like

⁵³ See Wah’s interview with Davey for a discussion of this. He also said in his email to the author on November 18, 2008, “Olson is more important to me for response to the poetics of place (including the implicated ‘nation’).”

Olson's, his lines move with a highly irregular pace, alternating between lengthy prose lines and one or two-syllable ones, though his make more use of puns, ambiguity, and other performative operations of language. While reading, one has to pay attention to breathing, much the same as in hiking on a zigzagging mountain lane. It is unpredictable where one may encounter a rapid flow of lyrical yet enigmatic images, or where the journey may suddenly come to its end, leaving one with feelings of endless wonder, loss, or nostalgia. He can be as inventive and playful with language as to render a crossword puzzle in a couplet: "nv s ble / tr ck" (Pictograms 25). The removal of the letter "i" from the words clearly mirrors his questioning of the traditional lyric "I." Moreover, there is always a tension between the space and the printing on the page, between speech and writing, between writing and listening. If Olson has taught him to see the poem as an object of energy that the poet projects toward the reader, Wah engages the reader more in the process of meaning making. His readers often have to relinquish the passive position of merely receiving the "energy transfer" from the poet. The reader, rather, participates in researching the origin of the words and their textual and intertextual movements in order to fully understand a poem. Are words not, after all, as twentieth-century linguistic theory has shown us, arbitrary signs, without any logical, stable relation to the reality of things they are supposed to "mean"?

The "meaning" of poems, in this sense, may not refer to what poems describe as much as to the poet's notions of language that ground his or her act of composing. Wah's 1972 volume Tree, for example, features an intermedia experiment in which poems are placed alongside drawings of trees by Bird Hamilton. All of the poems in Tree are

included later in Loki. The penultimate poem in Tree provides a glimpse of his early experimental writing:

 this is a hard language to work out
 the images keep interrupting the talking
 trees keep being pictures of themselves
 my words keep meaning pictures
 of words meaning tree
 and its not easy
 to find myself in the picture
 except there is a strange familiarity (Tree unpaginated)

These self-referential lines constantly call attention to how the words operate, or fail to operate, in the text (“hard to work out,” “keep interrupting,” “keep meaning pictures”).

The reader will find that the traditional lyric “I” hardly fits in this self-portrait about language (“not easy to find myself in the picture”). Thus, Wah focuses on words as individual signifiers and on the difficulty of enabling their performance. If Ponge’s “poetic performative” in Derrida’s reading makes visible the performative dimension of language through descriptive and narrative lines, Wah stages the (failed) performance of language more directly for the reader by allowing him/her to experience the materiality of language in an unmediated way.

Other examples of Wah’s early exploration of the performative nature of language include a poem titled “Lardeau,” first published in 1965 and later included in Loki in 1980 (The reader may first need to know, Lardeau is a town in British Columbia on Kootenay Lake). Here, Wah unfolds the poem’s central moment after an emphatic sentence, “There is little to say.” In so doing, he attempts to engage the reader by saying and not-saying simultaneously, then driving the reader to think about the relation between the reality of things and the limitations of language. In another poem around this time titled “The Canoe, Too,” stanzas repeatedly open with the statement “there is all that

talk,” against which he conveys a Zen-Buddhist sense of profound stillness with lines like these: “the mind wanders there in a canoe language carries / like a picture framing you in the black ice water” (Loki 44). Trying to go beyond all the ambient “talking,” the poem requires an imaginative reading for the “meaning” attached to what is not said rather than what is actually said. Still another good example can be seen at the beginning of a poem in the “Earth” series: “Sometimes the feet / find out what a trick the mind is. A necessary / disguise for what the heart expects” (Loki 74). The punning of the word “feet” (“feet” as in poetic feet) not only links “the mind” and “the heart” to the earth during a physical journey the poem describes but also reflects back on the poem itself as an adventure in language that the mind undertakes.

Like Olson, Wah sees the significance of “place” as a source of individual vision and power for a writer, or what he calls “the spiritual and spatial localities of the writer” (Loki 126). Rooted in the “place,” the poet writing nevertheless is not satisfied with representing it. He develops and expands the Olsonian practice of “field composition” as he begins to explore the potential of language beyond mimesis and referentiality. Yet unlike Olson’s deep concern with social history and cultural conditions, Wah’s earlier “place” writing shows a rather monotonous asocial focus. While the concern with language continues to be the basis of his poetics, his writing since the late 1970s shifts thematic focus from the natural world to his family background and writing as an mixed-race writer. The shift is not accidental. He began to explore issues of racial and ethnic identities in the late 1970s and early 1980s, precisely the time when Canadian official discourse of race began to recognize mixed-race groups and “visible minority.” First referring to all racial minorities in Canada, “visible minority” began to specify “persons,

other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” in the early 1980s (Day “Must All Asianness Be American” 49; qtd. in Lo 106). In spite of his self-identification as mixed race, Wah can actually pass as white; his mixed-race identity, or his partial “Asianness,” is invisible. The very invisibility of this identity provides a site in which he can reflect on the problematics of the official discourse that foregrounds the physical surface of race. A self-interrogation about the absence of race in his early writing makes Wah increasingly aware of the social conditions in which he writes. In the interview with Davey, he talks about how he has grown up in and actually participated in the national silence about Asian Canadian identity. What he had done was only liberating “a mainstream male subject” with his experimental writing like other white, male avant-garde poets (107). “I was white enough to get away with it, and did,” Wah confesses (112). Looking back, he is more aware of the social significance of the Olsonian “sense of resistance,” or the “desire to resist the colonizing effects of a normative and mainstream culture” (“Meandering Interview” 99). It is with this thoughtful introspection and self-critique that his later books undertake a profound exploration of racial and ethnic identities.

“When you’re not ‘pure’ you just make it up”

When asked if his writing since the 1970s is closely linked to the Olsonian influence, Wah said, “The Olson residue lingers, but there’s so much else that has also come to shape in the last thirty years that I feel the tag a little limiting” (“Meandering Interview” 103). Indeed, since the 1970s Wah’s writing has shown a lot of other intertextual connections to authors and art forms of various kinds. “First Personal Poem,”

for example, calls for a comparative reading with Ted Berrigan's series of "personal poems," both of which "formally pay homage to" Frank O'Hara's 1959 "Personal Poem" (Cabri 84). The collection Breathin' My Name with a Sigh takes its title from the lyrics of a popular song called "Deep Purple," performed by several jazz and rock stars at different times during the twentieth century.⁵⁴ And from this collection on, the preoccupation with family in many of his poems is similar to that of confessional poetry in the United States and anticipates many Asian American poems along this same line in the 1980s and 1990s. More prominent in Wah's work, however, is his persistent concern with language itself, which makes him one of the early writers associated with Language Poetry.⁵⁵ For example, in Waiting for Saskatchewan, which won the Governor General's Literary Award in 1985, Wah's experimentation with language and form interrogates existing language for categorization of race and ethnicity; his exploration of identity as performative, complicated by the awareness of his father's and his own mixed race identity, raises important questions about the politics of form.

Like Wah, Language poets in the United States such as Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian are strongly influenced by Olson and other New American poets. Emerging as a group in the 1970s, these poets place their attention "primarily on language and ways of making meaning" (Bernstein and Andrews 128). They call into question "vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program, or subject matter" with the aim of focusing attention back on to language itself (Bernstein and Andrews 128).

⁵⁴ See Burlingame, for a history of the song: originally written by the jazz composer Peter DeRose, "Deep Purple" was first published as a piano composition. Mitchell Parish added lyrics in 1939, and it soon became a hit through Larry Clinton and His Orchestra with vocals of Bea Wain. Other popular versions of the song include one by the rock group Nino Tempo & April Stevens in 1963 and one by Donny and Maire Osmond's in 1975.

⁵⁵ Charles Bernstein includes Wah in his list of early Language poets of the 1970s in a recent interview. See Bernstein, "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E POETRY — A Retrospective."

Informed by an essentially Marxist opposition against the commodification of language in the capitalist social order and by a deconstructive notion of nonreferentiality of the signifier, Language poets see lyric poetry as existing in a complicated web of social and political climates and are committed to exploring the relation of aesthetics to politics and the ways in which poetry can enact social critique (Bernstein vii, Perloff Dance of the Intellect 233). Their poetics echo Theodor Adorno's famous lecture "On Lyric Poetry and Society" which insists that lyric poetry inevitably responds to society and that the highest lyric work is one in which "language itself acquires a voice" (43).⁵⁶ They are determined to go further than the modernist innovation Adorno celebrates by foregrounding "the formation of an individual text" instead of "positing the self as the primary organizing feature of writing" (qtd. in Perloff Dance of the Intellect 220). Their work, committed to experimentation more radical than that of New American poets like Olson, refuses to create the sense of a fixed controlling speaking subject. While Silliman, as mentioned above, associates Language poetry's radical formal strategies exclusively with white male heterosexual poets, critics of Asian American poetry have noted some language-based practices on the part of Asian American poets. Timothy Yu in his 2000 essay "Form and Identity in Language Poetry and Asian American Poetry" argues that reading Asian American poets' language-based poetics such as John Yau's exposes Language poets' "strains and limits in the political project [...] particularly around the issues of race and identity" (424). Xiaojing Zhou also questions Silliman's idea in her reading of Filipino American poet Catalina Cariaga as a Language poet. Zhou examines how Cariaga seeks a "new language and form to articulate Filipino American women's

⁵⁶ Also see Yu's "Form and Identity in Language Poetry and Asian American Poetry," 426, for how Bernstein echoes Adorno's view of lyric poetry.

multifaceted experience.” Wah’s “Language poems” appear earlier in the 1970s, prior to Yau’s and Cariaga’s. As shown in Waiting for Saskatchewan, his poems are more focused than theirs on experimenting with syntax and word use. In this way, he exposes relentlessly the operation of signifiers in marking bodily difference in a multi-racial society.

Waiting for Saskatchewan opens with selected segments from his earlier book Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh, now accompanied by elusive, fragmentary references to the poet’s family history. The first poem in the book presents a collage about the family’s immigration and working class background: “Waiting for saskatchewan / and the origins grandparents countries places converged / europe asia railroads carpenters nailed grain elevators,” and before the reader can make a narrative out of the fragments, the book strikes one with two equally, if not more, puzzling short pieces, placed at the center of opposite pages. The first one reads:

Relation speaks. Tree talks hierarchy loop subject returns.
Knowledge a bag of things to be changed later to
knowledge. Statement of instructions horoscope Wah
language reads reading out of order in order to speak to
itself feed picked up lists family and complete branches
worlds end there. (4)

Without a clearly-presented speaker like that of a conventional lyric poem, Wah’s poem gives the agency of speaking to things that are usually talked about: “Relation speaks,” “Tree talks,” and so on. The series of short declarative statements, apparently simple and plain in phrasing, create a complicated web of questions paradoxically. What “relation,” and what does “relation” tell? Who is predicting the future by reading the “horoscope,” and who is horoscoped — Wah the poet, or rather the whole family, the “complete branches”? In the process of trying to “make sense,” the reader’s habit of “making sense”

is radically challenged. What stands out about the piece is not *what* it tells but *how* it progresses. From the first two-word sentence to the last run-on sentence of more than twenty words, the poem escalates its unsettling effect with increasingly entangled “relations” between words. The circular syntax caused by the doubling of words in “Knowledge...later to knowledge” and “language reads reading out of order in order to speak to itself” echoes the word “loop” in the first line. It depicts a constraining world within which a poet has to struggle but finds hard to break through, a world made up of “hierarchy,” tedious “knowledge” about “things,” and ego-centric “language” that is meant only to “speak to itself.” The poet’s family name “Wah,” placed at the center of the poem, remains ambiguous, its indeterminate grammatical status rendering it out of place. Awkwardly situated, its central position becomes something like a gesture of self-mockery. It recalls one of Wah’s other pieces in Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh that also plays with the name “Wah.” Composed mostly of interjected words and signs for sound and breathing such as “mmmmmm / hm / ... yuhh Yeh Yeh,” the poem ends with two consecutive lines of “w_____h” and seems to highlight his family name as a torn, dislocated “foreign” sound. In both poems, the frustration on the part of the reader, due to the deferral of both a tenable speaker and direct meaning, echoes the poet’s own strife in language and in familial, social, and political relations of the real world, where the “loop” of “knowledge” and “language” constrains one’s voice because they are always racially or ethnically marked. The poem here thus provides a rather bleak, though at times also funny, description of reading and writing by foregrounding a unique syntax and word play.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ See Day, for a reading of the poem that considers Wah’s thinking on both racial and class identities.

Following the family history vaguely established in the opening poem and the tension and frustration manifested in the second poem of “loop,” the next poem on the opposite page articulates a question about the notion of “origin.”

Are origins magnetic lines across an ocean
migrations of genetic spume or holes, dark
mysteries within which I carry further into the World
through blond and blue-eyed progeny father’s fathers
clan name Wah from Canton east across the bridges
still or could it all be lateral craving hinted
in the bioplastic cloud of simple other organism
as close as out under the apple tree? (5)

Here, the speaker’s voice is clearer. Interweaving biological terms (“genetic,” “progeny,” “bioplastic,” and “organism”) with geographical ones (“magnetic,” “ocean,” and “migration”), the poem makes it difficult to locate “origins” in a map of relations that seems too complicated to sort out. The scientific terms here do not suggest a clearly defined “origin” but instead alienates origin by making it increasingly elusive and mysterious because of the esoteric allusions, reminiscent of the discriminatory “race science” popular at the turn of the twentieth century. In terms of syntax, the convoluted structure of the run-on sentence again forces one to pull the piece apart into shorter and more organized units for reading and understanding, yet it is not an easy thing to do. The biographical knowledge about the poet’s Eurasian identity may simplify the reading of the poem, making overt the tension between the “blond and blue-eyed progeny” and the Chinese “clan name Wah” in the poem. More noteworthy, however, is that the supposedly available alternatives in answering the question, determined by the conjunction “or,” a sign for ambiguity and uncertainty, in fact do not provide any simple answer. For the poem raises more fundamental questions between the lines: in what language, in what terms, should “origin” be defined? And as hinted in the metaphorical

phrasing “dark mysteries within which I carry further,” “lines,” “cloud,” is “origin” after all something invented or imagined? Does the family name originated in another nation necessarily determine one’s identity as foreign? If “nation” can be seen as an “imagined community,” a socially constructed notion as in Benedict Anderson’s theory, how can we rethink a concept like “national origin” and the ways in which ethnic and racial minorities are identified?

Read together, the two short poems frame questions about “origin” as they dismantle and problematize the existing system of words and syntax for defining racial or ethnic identity and in so doing suggest a critique of that system. Bernstein’s words in “How Empty Is my Bread Pudding” precisely describes what Wah does here: “I don’t want to make poems that tell you what to think but that show a different order of thinking. [...] The job of poetry is not to get syntax back in the corral but to follow its wild journey into the unclaimed” (70, 73).⁵⁸ This way of performative writing also recalls what Kristeva defines, through a study of avant-garde poetry, as a “poetic language,” in which “meaning and signification... do not exhaust the poetic function” (132). This kind of poetry, she argues, cannot “be studied through its meaning and signification” for that will fail to “see what in the poetic function departs from the signified and the transcendental ego and makes of what is known as ‘literature’ something other than knowledge” (133). This kind of writing beyond “meaning and signification” can be clearly seen in the work of American Language poets and Wah. Yet different from Kristeva’s often psychoanalytical approach to language, Language poets like Bernstein are more concerned about the crisis of language becoming a transparent medium of commercialism.

⁵⁸ “How Empty Is my Bread Pudding” is loosely structured piece of epigrammatic lines about poetry and poetics, dedicated to the linguist George Lakoff. Bernstein reads it at the conference for Wah at the University of Calgary in 2003 and on several other occasions.

Engaged in language-centered writing like Bernstein and many other American Language poets, Wah's focus on the materiality of language is increasingly linked to his exploration of identity as performative and his effort to seek the possibility of an oppositional performativity in writing.

In the second section of Waiting for Saskatchewan, he narrates a physical search of origin and makes clear the necessity of "faking it" or performing one's identity, especially when the identity is "not 'pure'" (43). With more conventional phrasing and syntax, the poems take more risk in the overall form: they are written in "utaniki," an originally Japanese form of mixed prose and poetry. In one of the poems about a visit to Japan and China, Wah tells his late father about an encounter with his own mixed race identity:

I've misplaced the family information my mother gave me so I can't check out actual possible connections still here in the Canton region. I mention this to the guides and the others in our tour group, tell them my father was sent here as a child to be raised and educated by his Chinese relatives.

You were part Chinese I tell them.
They look at me. I'm pulling their leg.
So I'm Chinese too and that's why my name is Wah.
They don't really believe me. That's o.k.
When you're not 'pure' you just make it up. (43 original italics)

The taken-for-granted binary of "purity" vs. "hybridity" becomes especially remarkable considering the hybrid form of the piece. The tension between the poet-speaker's claim about his "Chinese" identity and the disbelief on the part of his audience (including both local Chinese and his fellow visitors from Canada) lends a dramatically ironic coloring to the moment. Unable to find the relatives of his father in China, he does not have any physical proof for his Chinese-ness except his Chinese-sounding family name "Wah." Misplacing his relatives' addresses then indicates the apparently "misplaced," in-between

identity of his father as well as himself: how can one be “Chinese,” while at the same time being born with mixed race identity and, in his case, having a face that enables him to pass as white? The line “When you’re not ‘pure’ you just make it up” clearly points out this predicament in an apparently easy yet profoundly ironic way. At first sight, the line provides a view of oneself through the eyes of others: reflecting racial opposition and hierarchy, mixed race means a lack of origin (“not ‘pure’”) to some people. The ambiguities of the phrase “make it up” — to fake or invent something, or to compensate for a loss — further acknowledge the hybrid identity as fragmentary and generally negative. Chinese or white, claiming either part seems only to be a synecdochic performance and a demonstration of one’s “impurity.” Yet, on another level, the line suggests a performative as well. Hybridity can mean a subversive potential of border crossing as well, and to “make it up” can also point to the possibility of inventing and performing something new. If Hahn, also a poet of mixed race identity, focuses on exploring Asian, particularly Japanese, culture in order to “possess” it, Wah is more concerned fundamentally with the conceptualization of cultural and racial identity. His poem makes one wonder, after all, what is “Chinese” (or “white,” or “Canadian”)? And how do we define “pure”?

One of the most important theoretical works on hybridity, Robert Young’s Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race traces the colonial history of the Western conception of “hybridity.” According to him, “in the nineteenth century [hybridity] was used to refer to a physiological phenomenon; in the twentieth century it has been reactivated to describe a cultural one” (6). Young’s metanarrative on hybridity based on the concept evolved in British cultural history tries to find a means of

accounting for all postcolonial and ethnic minority literatures, and his sometimes over-general use of the concept as a characteristic of “contemporary cultural discourse,” without analysis of any specific texts, lacks a concrete reference base. In Waiting for Saskatchewan, Wah explores “hybridity” as *both* a “physiological phenomenon” *and* a “cultural one,” to use Young’s terms. If Wah’s poem on a failed search for origin in the alienating system of biological terms (“genetic,” “progeny,” “bioplasmic”) highlights the physical aspect of hybridity, this later poem about claiming Chinese tackles the cultural politics of hybridity that a racialized physical reading entails. The passage not only calls into question the stability of racial or ethnic terms like “Chinese” or “purity” but also mocks white-centrism by remapping the racial categories according to the coordinates of the “other.” While critics such as Young remind us of the predicament of hybridity caused by unequal power relations within a white-dominated social environment, Wah’s passage quoted above interestingly reverses the common scenario with its setting in China, where Wah, an apparently white man, strives to fit in with his partial Chineseness. This failure to have himself identified as the same as the majority in China looks especially ironic if read against the other pieces about his father’s struggle to become Canadian in this book as well as in his other collections. Mirroring his father’s difficulty in a Eurocentric society, Wah’s physical “whiteness” becomes a visible mark of a “minority” in his father’s hometown and makes him visually the “other” in China. As the change of geographical location reshuffles the center-margin order demographically, “minority,” “Chinese,” or “white” signify differently, their instability and fluidity rendered visible. Mixed race identity in the text then becomes a cultural tool by which the

poet-speaker demonstrates the limits of the racial and ethnic categories one is often forced to inhabit.

Homi Bhabha's discussion of hybridity, which Young refers to in a celebratory way in his book, is important to Wah. Bhabha sees the colonial presence not as something monolithic and purely authoritative but marked with ambivalence and hybridity, as colonial domination and discrimination always involves deformation and displacement (The Location of Culture 159). In an essay titled "Half-Bred Poetics" written in 1994, Wah repeatedly cites Bhabha and expresses a willingness to see the position of minority, or what he calls "the hyphen," as a site of possibilities for "poetics of oppositions (feminist, sexual, racial)" (Faking It 90). He is interested in Bhabha's idea of hybridity as a "pressure that the hyphen brings to bear against the master narratives of duality" (Faking It 74). Read against the highly arbitrary and contingent terms of racial designation, Wah's phrase "make it up" becomes suggestive of an oppositional performativity that hybrid identity is able to enact, though he does not clarify how exactly "you just make it up," or how exactly to form an emancipatory sense of identity as ethnic minority or mixed race, until the end of the book.

Turning from the ironic to a more meditative mood, Wah becomes increasingly analytical about his father's as well as his own predicament, and toward the end of the book the self-analysis results in an affirmation of hybrid identity.

Father/Mother Haibun #13

The issue is to divide into two, duplicate, derive language
which is a filter for the blood, and then to replenish thought
in a precise flow to converge again on life, how much a
copy of you I am also a material for my own initials
(F.J.) Karen Marie Erickson when your mother died all the
undoubling condensed memory added up to a single snowy

winter month like January.

**I get up and look, no sky today, just the fog. How one
can one be?** (88 original emphasis)

This is a piece from his series of “haibun,” again an originally Japanese prose form “written from a haiku sensibility and, in this case concluded by an informal haiku line” (Waiting “A Prefatory Note”). The main part is again composed of run-on sentences, one pushed into another, and combines a prosaic rhythm and lyrical moments into a tangling and convoluted whole. At first it is not clear who is speaking and who is spoken to. Soon the reader may find, as other pieces in the book reveal, the name here is of Wah’s maternal grandmother; Wah is probably the speaker, addressing the piece to his mother. The issue of biological origin, again, initiates the speaking, and words like “divide,” “duplicate,” and “blood” seem to be reiterating the sense of division and fragmentation usually associated with mixed race identity. Yet two lines into the piece, Wah starts to unfold a positive view about mixed race identity: despite the two racial, ethnic, or cultural dimensions one’s identity involves, one does not have to feel incomplete or partitioned, as the most important thing is “to replenish thought in a precise flow to converge again on life.” The emphasis on making complete by using words like “to replenish,” “to converge,” “added up to” reveals a belief in the possibility of performing one’s identity as an active political intervention. The first step toward realizing that possibility may lie in the very act of accepting the intersectionality of one’s own position as mixed race and seeing hybridity as a predominant phenomenon in every culture. Identifying with his mixed race father throughout the book, here Wah shows a connection to his mother too, “how much a copy of you I am also.” The image in the final haiku line is more telling: the “fog” itself is a hybrid form of smoke and water, blending the sky and the earth, and

the image thus becomes a suggestive lead-in to the final question. “How one can one be” overtly articulates Wah’s questioning of so-called racial or ethnic “purity,” with the use of the ambiguous word “one.” The idea of “make it up” in this sense means performing against the normative prescriptions of the pure/hybrid binarism.

With the idea of “converging” here, Wah literally comes full circle in the book, echoing the opening collage, “the origins grandparents countries places converged / europe asia railroads carpenters nailed grain elevators” (3). Throughout the book, more than the father or the poet himself, the agency of “making complete” by performing an identity in spite of external fragmentation becomes a major part of the poems. To negotiate one’s mixed-race identity as an intersectional identity is not to erase the way in which mixed race identity is often designated, though. “Faking it” or “making it up,” at the literal level associated with fraud and illegitimacy, always reminds one of the racial anxiety present in the story of Wah’s father. Yet Wah’s poems, in showing the ambivalence of the terms, highlight the emancipatory promise that this identity provides. This emphasis recalls what Bhabha defines as the “third space.” An “ambivalent space of enunciation” showing that “hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable” (Location of Culture 55), Bhabha’s theory of “third space” also insists that “the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges” but to “enable other positions to emerge, to displace the histories that constitute it, and set up new structures of authority, new political initiatives” (“Third Space” 211). Wah’s poems foreground the agency of inventing something new and attempt to create such a “third space,” in which he sees racial and ethnic identity as

performative and seeks a performative language as a political intervention to the “hierarchical claims to ‘purity’.”

If we look at the formal aspect of Waiting for Saskatchewan, there are questions remaining for exploration. The whole book — not just the *utaniki* or the *haibun* pieces — is “not pure” in form, representing hybridity by blending and combining prose and poem, experimental syntax and conventional narrative, Japanese traditional style and English language, family history in Canada and allusion to ancient Chinese poets. The dazzling experience with language the book provides nevertheless makes the reader wonder how to define the end product of this “converging”: Is merely putting together all the available tools from different cultures enough to subvert the asymmetrical distribution of power between cultures? If Bhabha’s notions, as critics like Antony Easthope and Aijaz Ahmad have argued, are rather amorphous and to a large extent “replace historicity with mere contingency” (Ahmad 17), how significant is the hybrid form of Wah’s poems in the historical context of Western colonialism and in the contemporary context of globalization when East Asian cultural elements may have an entirely different meaning as a new kind of cultural capital? Combining forms from different cultures, on whose terms is the hybridizing done? That Wah’s book does not provide answers to the questions indicates that Wah is searching not for the meaning of “origin” and but for a language in which to define it. He strives for a poetic style of his own in which to write about this search most effectively. His later books will demonstrate a more sophisticated hybrid form through which his thinking on ethnic identity deepens and broadens.

Performative Word, “Noisy” Text

Wah's writing since the early 1990s has continued the exploration about identity and language and has involved more reflection on his own form and its effect on reading. He says in the introduction to Faking It, "I find I need to make things up for myself, or I want to camouflage the critical gaze to gain some loft and, hopefully, new perspective" (Faking it 1-2); poetry and criticism seem to merge in his writings, and oftentimes it is hard to tell the difference. In books like Alley Alley Home Free, a collection dating from 1992, and All Americans, a chapbook with limited distribution published in 2002, he no longer dwells on the predicament of trying to locate one's home or the struggle to resist the "hegemonic claim to purity." Alley Alley Home Free develops the earlier hybrid style into a labyrinth of language and musicality, better integrating elements from different cultures with a traceless subtlety; All Americans increases the breadth to his "ethnic writing" as it turns from a personal focus to concerns about "others" in a rewriting of a historical event regarding Native Americans. Poems from these books demonstrate how Wah's earlier notion of "faking" language has been enriched and developed into a poetics characterized by a performativity more adventurous than before. His performance of words develops into a kind of "ethnic writing" that involves a concern about "earth" — the "origin" of natural life at the most fundamental level — and a sense of ethical responsibility that is not limited to the boundaries of his particular ethnic group.

Wah has written about his intention to broaden the meaning of "ethnicity" in several essays in the late 1980s and early 1990s shortly before Alley Alley Home Free was published (Faking It 17, 53). In "A Poetics of Ethnicity," for example, Wah notes that, with the letters "e" and "th," the word "ethnicity" seems to have a link with "earth" (Faking It 55), and later in the interview with Rudy he would further clarify, "Eth as

ethos as home. Earth is home” (166). He also finds a link between ethnicity with “ethics” through the Greek etymon “eth”, and believes that “To write (or live) ethnically is also to write (or live) ethically” (Faking It 55-58). Later with Rudy, he mentions Olson’s influence regarding the writer’s “ethical responsibility to language and social change” (166). A close examination of his poems makes clear how his language performance enriches the concept of ethnicity by breaking the constraints of conventional understandings of the term.

Alley Alley Home Free is written in a time when Wah becomes increasingly aware of the critical discourse of ethnic writing in Canada. Deborah Keahey argues that the main point of the book lies in Wah’s “construction of home in language” (154), but unlike Wah’s aim to deconstruct the common reading habit of emphasizing the fixed meaning of a line or a text, Keahey remains focused on extracting the meaning of Wah’s book. Instead, I argue that, throughout its play with words and syntax, Alley Alley Home Free works to emancipate language’s potential beyond definitive referentiality. What he accentuates is not so much a “dynamic conception of home in motion” (Keahey 154) but the very act of performing, through which Wah calls into question so-called “ethnic writing.” While Wah’s earlier books carry his linguistic as well as political exploration without conscious attention to his readers, in the opening of Alley Alley Home Free he explicitly clarifies his view of language, on which his own view of “ethnicity” is based. He provides a guide for his readers who, attracted to the somewhat autobiographical Waiting for Saskatchewan, may have been painfully baffled by the following Music at the Heart of Thinking (1987), a volume of unpunctuated, stream-of-consciousness and highly improvisatory pieces.

The meaning available from language goes beyond the actual instance of this word, that word. A text is a place where a labyrinth of continually revealing meanings are available, a place that offers more possibility than we can be sure we know, sometimes more than we want to know. It isn't a container, static and apparent. Rather, it is noisy, frequently illegible. Reading into meaning starts with a questioning glance, a seemingly obvious doubloon on a mast. The multiplicity can be read, should be read, even performed. But then again, perhaps meaning is intransitive and unreadable, only meant to be made. (5)

If in Waiting for Saskatchewan Wah still shows traces of Olson's "place"-centered poetics, here Wah goes further with a broadened notion of "place." In this opening piece titled "One Makes (the) Difference," Wah sees a "place" in a dynamic and "noisy" text that challenges the usual tendency to emphasize the referential function of language in reading and writing. This passage summarizes the deconstructive view of language his writing has shown from the very beginning of his career, when he, writing about the Kootenay landscape, explores language for its power to not only represent the image but to constantly reinvent and reflect upon itself. Used later in his exploration of hybrid identity, this performative language becomes a thought-provoking medium that calls attention to its own operation. The dynamic text he foregrounds here as well as in all his writing invites an active reading, which instead of aiming to find meaning supposedly located in a word or text might, rather, be aware of the slipperiness of referentiality and the possibility of multiple interpretations. Meaning, then, is to be "made" actively. In this sense, reading is a performative act, too, one that interacts with the writer's performance. As the title of this piece "one makes (the) difference" ambiguously suggests, Wah is not only deeply interested in the working of the arbitrary linguistic signs based on "difference" but always tries to show how their working can generate social and political impact since "one" — the writer, and also the reader — can always "make a difference."

The subsequent poems in the book make clear how Wah tries to “make a difference” both linguistically and socially. His performative poetics is clearly shown in his inventive re-design and arrangement of words. In one of the most fragmented, improvisatory, and labyrinth-like pieces, Wah’s dissembling of words challenges received notions of home and ethnicity. One finds, in the middle of the loosely structured poem, this stunning sign that comes from the word “home,” apparently “illegible” yet profoundly suggestive:

om
 h e
 om (25)

Dismantling the word “home,” Wah doubles it at the same time. In so doing, he disrupts the original sign “home” and unsettles the concept from its usual association with a fixed location. The resulting difficulty of pronouncing the sign makes the concept even harder to define. If the poems in Waiting for Saskatchewan still try to locate or find a language to clearly define his father’s as well as his own particular kind of identity, this book becomes more certain and philosophical about the impossibility of pinning down one’s origin. Several passages after the unsettled “home” sign, a stanza asserts ethnicity by breaking apart another word and deferring its reading: “I want one ethnic thing here, / right from the start. Dis- / orientation” (26). The word “disorientation,” with a line break in the middle, makes highly visible the derivation of the word from its root “orient.” Originally referring to the east, the word “orient” has signified the Other, the exotic, in dominating western discourses, as Edward Said argues in his ground-breaking criticism of Orientalism. While “disorientation” normally refers to the “loss of one’s sense of direction” or “mental confusion or impaired awareness, especially regarding place, time,

or personal identity” (American Heritage Dictionary), here Wah makes the term subvert the tendency to Orientalize or exoticize the ethnic minority with the separated and thus highlighted “dis-” and “orientation.” Wah’s speaker, in pointing out “dis-orientation” as the “one ethnic thing,” clearly shows a resistance against normative notions and practices of “ethnicity” that foreground the visible difference and the otherly, exotic side of one’s identity. The “ethnic thing” that the speaker really “want[s]” is a revisionist idea of ethnic identity that nullifies the center-margin, self-other binarism.

Following the adversarial statement about what he opposes about ethnicity, Wah continues to force his readers to rethink what words are doing and can do in forming perceptions of ethnic minorities. In a series of prose poems subtitled “Pearagraphs for Roy Kiyooka,” for example, he sets ideas about language in a series of images and sounds of the natural world, and roots his poems deeply in a passion for earth and nature in general. The piece pays tribute to distinguished Japanese-Canadian artist and poet Roy Kiyooka, whose best-known poetry volume Pear Tree Pomes includes several poems about the loss of the mother tongue in an immigrant family. With several interestingly (mis)spelt words like “pearagraph” (paragraph) and “pome” (poem), Wah recalls the wittily ambiguous language of Kiyooka. Like Kiyooka, he intends to keep words alive, though in a more performative mode. The search for ethnic “origin” in Wah’s earlier poems is replaced by a connection to the more fundamental “origin” of natural life here.

Word as seed preserve brings up the notion of rotten language composting for the progeneration of itself and the ripe vocable as soft and juicy palpable but for the bite of belief and the Bering Isthmus migration so far from the Cantonese pollen.

Chinatown walking through the food smelling and then sitting down in a booth to taste the birds-nest soup or any

noodle late night neon ragtime all alone in the dawn music
Virgil's vigil down the street and home again home again.
(43)

The first passage quoted here, in Wah's typical run-on sentences without a fixed speaker at a fixed position, foregrounds stylistically and thematically the movement of words themselves. Wah compares "word" to the seed of a fruit, which can be "preserve[d]," signifying how language can be an organic, living force; even when "rotten," it can regenerate itself. Yet, the apparently on-going life of the lines is thwarted by the structure of "but for," when the long distance "migration" suddenly arrests the metaphorical connection between language and nature. The "Bering Isthmus" in the next line reminds one of the possible connection between Chinese immigrants and Native Americans, who might also have migrated from Asia to North America. The piece leaves numerous questions for the reader. Can the "Cantonese pollen" from warm South China survive the harsh winter on the west of Bering Sea? Or, do we really need to worry at all, as everything rooted in earth seems predestined to a "progenerative" cycle of living, dying, and returning again? Is Wah suggesting the destructive and irreversible effect of geographical and cultural displacement on language and identity formation, or is he rather emphasizing the power of language to transcend spatial and temporal barriers? Linking the vicissitudes of language to the displacement and regeneration of natural life, and linking his own "ethnic writing" to concerns with the natural world, Wah is nevertheless not neglecting the sociology and cultural politics of language use but rather provides a different perspective of looking at the potential of language in performing and creating culture. Unlike Kiyooka's lament for the loss of language—"how many languages have i lost losing my childhood pear tree" (208)—the force of Wah's poem lies

in its ambiguity, which engages the reader in thinking about the infinite possibilities at which the lines hint.

The subsequent stanza about a journey in Chinatown suggests the choice Wah has made as an “ethnic writer” in the face of all these possibilities. It draws on elements from different cultures: the night walk home is marked by traditional Chinese food (“birds-nest soup”), jazzy music (“ragtime,” which points to the musicality of the passage itself), Western classics (“Virgil,” with all its indications about travel and exile), as well as “Chinatown,” itself a sign of dislocation and diaspora. Not a simplistic “multicultural” synthesis, however, the overall musical flow of language emphasizes its own process of performing: without using a pronoun in these passages, Wah enables a freedom from the racially and ethnically marked “I” and draws the eye more to the action (“walking,” “sitting down,” “to taste”) and the musicality, which is highlighted by the repetition at the end (“home again home again”). Ironically, the question of where the speaker feels more at home, in Chinatown or in Western art, seems beside the point in the improvisatory jazz-like flow of lines. For the boundary between the so-called Chinese and Western is blurred in the music of the smoothly flowing passage. Given his deconstruction of the sign “home” in the earlier poem, in these lines “home” becomes a state of mind, or a perspective of seeing all available cultural resources as inspirational. The form created based on this mode reveals a hybrid language in which elements from “other” cultures work as integral parts of a poem without being exoticized or weakened. In other words, Wah tries, with his performative language, to fully emancipate the potential of words in revealing the power of the “other.” If the previous stanza is engaged in the questions of Kiyooka and many other Asian American poets, who are concerned with the loss of

language due to displacement, this stanza shows an attempt to recuperate some of that loss with his unique form based in multiple languages and cultural resources.

From the early Kootenay writings, to the search for the origin of racial and ethnic identity, to the later return to the more fundamental origin in “earth,” Wah’s writing has been focused on his own life in the environment with which he is familiar. His recent turn to the history and present of other parts of “America” has enriched his idea of ethnicity and ethnic writing even more. The poems in the chapbook All Americans are written in response to two panorama renderings of the Minnesota Massacre of 1862, as part of an installation project for the Art Gallery of Calgary in 2001. Most of the poems were actually written after the 9/11 attacks, making the text noteworthy in terms of its thinking about the past and present of the United States as a superpower.

The book again draws attention to the performative function of words — this time, that of personal pronouns — and interrogates the tendency of othering ethnic minorities. Each of the seven poems here is addressed from a different voice, each represented by a pronoun, “we,” “they,” “you,” “who,” “I,” “she,” or “he.” The resulting “noisy” text provides an especially rich version of the Native American history. The first poem in the series, addressed by a collective “we,” seems to be a dramatic monologue of the white settlers before their conflict with the Indians in 1862 happened; it opens with an ironic claim, “we are all americans,” the seemingly innocent, inclusive tone soon belied by the use of “squaws,” the derogatory word for Native American women. For Wah, “All Americans” recalls “play on several levels, though the material one for me is the term ‘All American’ as it has been applied to ‘star’ athletes at American universities” (email to author on January 28, 2009). The sentence “we are all Americans” is a highly loaded

statement if seen in the context of contemporary global politics: President Ronald Reagan once used the phrase to promote economic partnership with Caribbean neighbors in the late 1980s (Isaacson); after the 9/11 attacks several western European headlines used it to show sympathy and alliance with the United States (Dell'Orto). "Americans," as shown in these uses, has been identified with the center's domination of the political discourse. Opening with such a claim, Wah's book immediately connects history with the present and makes readers wonder who the whole poem is really about, the white settlers driving indigenous people away more than a century ago, or the American government claiming power at the turn of the twenty-first century. The poem further makes visible the continuity of America's hegemony in lines like these: "Little did we think how soon we should pass through the terrible ordeal that awaited us, this calling card of a / global culture." The critique of the American power through this performative "we" is also revealed in other poems throughout the book: the poem addressed from the voice of an Indian with an "I" is filled with fear, anger, and sadness probably following the 1862 execution; another uses the collective "they" for the empty, vague, dehumanized image of "terrorists." "How do you know / they are maintenance workers and not Rife soldiers in costume? Did you check their ID's?" Lines like these parody the xenophobia seen after 9/11 and also recall the white settlers' attitude toward Native Americans. With such a drama of multiple voices, Wah clearly exposes the problematics of a white-centric nationalism developed historically.

After all, who gets to be called "American"? Wah forces the reader to rethink the problem in both historical and contemporary contexts, and more significantly, he reminds the reader that the political manipulation of language has always been involved in racial

and ethnic categorizing of people. With a strong sense of ethical responsibility, All Americans clearly demonstrates the idea of connecting “ethnic writing” and “ethical writing” as Wah mentions in Faking It. If his earlier experimenting with multiple cultural resources stems from his personal perspective, this new book shows a much broader scope in social and political concerns. His reflection on the history of Native Americans resonates with his thinking on how the world is affected by the spread and control of American power today.⁵⁹

As the title phrase “alley alley home free” (with its origin in the hide-and-seek game) reminds us, Wah has been continuously going on a journey beyond “home” or the constraining boundaries of “ethnicity” in its usual sense; his performative use of language, as shown in his recent books, defines an “ethnic writing” of his own, in which elements from “other” cultures and “minority” perspectives perform not as markers of the exotic and passive but rather necessarily constituent parts of the multivocal text. Carrying the deconstructive view of language into his poems about ethnic identity, Wah has always stressed the possibilities of language in creating and performing rather than passive representing. What Michael Davidson says of Gertrude Stein, a poet Wah often teaches in his poetry classes, applies to what Wah has tried to do with his writing: “[to read Stein,] we must discover language as an active ‘exchange’ of meaning rather than a static paradigm of rules and features. The question is not ‘what’ she means but ‘how’” (198). Wah does this but with a much more specific focus on the potential of writing to redefine “ethnic writing.” Examining how he starts with Olsonian principles, how he connects

⁵⁹ It is also worth noting that Wah later includes the series of the poems in his intermedia book Sentenced to Light published in 2008, a volume of pieces that foreground the interplay between his poetic texts and works of by several visual artists.

with and differs from Language poets, and how his continuous experimentation with form becomes a means for conveying as a criticism of dominant social discourse on race and ethnicity, one can see a performative poetics developed at the intersection of multiple discourses. Based on this poetics, Wah broadens the notions of “ethnicity” and “ethnic writing” and may provide new inspiration for Asian North American poets and critics.

Chapter Four

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Intermedia Texts: A Visual Poetry

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha has drawn increased critical attention as a prominent Asian American author, ever since the 1994 publication of Writing Self Writing Nation, an anthology of essays on Cha's Dictée edited by Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón. Posthumously published in 1982 in a highly experimental form that involves multiple media, genres, and languages, Dictée has been read as a work of autobiography, fiction, and poetry. Recent studies have paid greater attention to its visual aspects.⁶⁰ While Cha is primarily known as the author of this one work, Cha was actually a prolific artist in the 1970s and well-known for her artist's books, performances, and video and film works, which all engage in "intermedia" maneuvers between image, written text, and sometimes performance and projection. In probably the only existing study of Cha's art across multiple media, Sayumi Takahashi reads several of Cha's visual art pieces and artist's books as part of her study on "feminine-gendered art-making."⁶¹ Like Takahashi, I focus on the "intermedia" characteristics of Cha's oeuvre and examine her highly innovative texts, including Dictée; yet I study Cha as an artist-poet, whose avant-garde forms create a space for the visual and the poetic components of her work to interact. By "intermedia," I refer to the artistic practice that interweaves elements from a variety of media including

⁶⁰ See Cheng (first published as a journal article in 1998), for an early discussion of the images in Dictée. More recent studies of the visual aspect of the book include Phu's and Wester's essays on the photos in Dictée, Ohnesorge's discussion of Dictée as a "imagetext."

⁶¹ Takahashi's dissertation is titled "Discipline and Publish: Intermedia Poetics of Resistance in the Art-Texts of Otagaki Rengetsu, Yoko Ono and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha." She does not explain the concepts of "intermedia" and "art-texts" in detail.

writing, visual design, and cinematic art in ways that make it impossible to define or categorize the work in terms of any single medium or genre. Drawing on Dick Higgins's concept of intermedia, I show how Cha's work integrates diverse media in ways that often challenge our basic conception of generic forms such as "novel," "film," and "poem." In so doing, she achieves a genre-blurring "visual poetry" that criticizes colonizing, border-imposing power.

What I call a "visual poetry" here is different from the "visual poetry" in the usual sense, which has long existed in literary history from George Herbert's pattern poems in the sixteenth century to contemporary poems that experiment with page design, abstract symbols, and mathematical equations (Huth). "Visual poetry," as it is usually understood, is characterized by a focused attention to the visual appearance of the poetic text on the page. Stéphane Mallarmé's later work "Un Coup de Dés" (1897) with its unconventional typographic design and page layout is considered one of the major influences on twentieth-century avant-garde visual poetry. Cha was an enthusiastic reader of Mallarmé during her undergraduate years. Her interest in typographic experimentation might have come from the influence of "Un Coup de Dés" (Lewallen 2). However, while paying attention to the visual appearance of the verbal text, Cha's visual poetry also interweaves poetic texts with visual elements including photographs, film stills, and even film projection itself. Moving between different media, her visual poetry is more dynamic and adventurous in form.

In this chapter, I read Cha's Surplus Novel, Exilée, and Dictée in relation to visual, film, intermedia, as well as literary art of her time, and in this way explore the dynamics between form and politics in her texts. If the themes of Cha's visual poetry express

concerns with issues such as female subjectivity, colonization, and ethnic identity, her intermedia forms critique the political and military power behind gender hierarchy, colonialism, and imposed borders such as the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Her formal innovation, as my study seeks to show, demonstrates that form is very often more than a simple, straightforward reflection of political positions; rather, it can provide a space for the poet as well as the reader to reconsider, negotiate, and transform the constraints of cultural and political boundaries.

Surplus Novel and the Necessity of a Multi-Contextual Reading

Born in Pusan, South Korea in 1951, Cha moved to the United States with her family in 1962. They settled in California, where Cha and her siblings went to Catholic schools. She studied literature and art at the University of California, Berkeley in the 1970s, and while there gained an opportunity to spend a year abroad in Paris studying film. By the time of her tragic, untimely death in New York in 1982, Cha had created an extraordinary body of work that includes artist's books, mail art, performance art, sculpture, video, film, as well as works on fabric and paper, all remarkable for their inventive formal characteristics. An archive of Cha's manuscripts and work is now hosted at the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, where I engaged in research for this study. From 2001 to 2003, the Berkeley Art Museum organized a series of exhibitions of Cha's work, titled The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Khung Cha (1951-1982). The exhibition catalogue provides a clear view of Cha's intermedia oeuvre and has become an important resource for the study of Cha.

One of the most intriguing works The Dream of the Audience is Cha's 1980 "sculpture," Surplus Novel, which provide an example of how her innovative way of presenting a text enhances the political power of its content (Figure 1).⁶² The work is composed of two small white porcelain bowls, each originally given to one of her siblings as a gift. Each of the bowls contains paper strips of typewritten text strung together with a very fine thread. The words on the paper strips in the two bowls make up two poems, or songs, respectively. One of them reads:

they calling me
they calling after me
hey yoko
hey yoko ono
yoko ono
yokoono
i ain't your
i ain't no i ain't
your yoko ono
i just want to
i just want
to be the wife
the wife of the
shoe shine man
shoe shine man
come dawn
come dusk
shine. Shoe shine.
shine.
they all say
please. please.
take care of
yourself. yourself
baby, you are all
you got
i know. don't i know.
i just want to be
the wife. of the
shoe shine man. (Lewallen 100)

⁶² The work is now in private collection, and my reading is based on the image and transcripts of the original text in the catalogue.

Standing out in Cha's writings for its humor, colloquialism, and sing-song rhythm, the poem was inspired by Cha's experience of being called "Yoko" while walking down the street. According to Constance Lewallen, it evokes John Lennon's songs about Yoko Ono (101). Yoko Ono, the famous—or notorious—"wife of John Lennon" is known in American and British popular culture as the Japanese woman who allegedly seduced Lennon and broke up the Beatles. Her status as an avant-garde visual, installation, and performance artist is often overlooked in this popular characterization of her. Blamed by the Lennon fans for the breaking up of the beloved band, Ono was a typical "Other" figure in the public's mind during the 1960s and 1970s. As critics such as Leslie Bow have noted, her notoriety in the Anglo-American popular culture might be to a large extent due to her hyper-visibility with a triply marginalized identity as an Asian, a woman, and also an experimental artist (Bow 4). Cha's misrecognition as Ono narrated in the poem, thus, becomes emblematic of a time when Asian women seemed inevitably identifiable as an Ono-type figure, seductive and dangerous. In an apparently light-hearted tone, the repeated statement of "to be the wife of" in the piece makes a sarcastic reference to Ono's identity as "the wife of John Lennon."

Surplus Novel as a whole is underlined by Cha's conscious identification with Ono. Like Ono's experimental art with its unpredictable blending of media, Cha experiments with artistic boundaries and genres and draws attention to the materiality of art.⁶³ What is this work, after all? Is it a "novel"? Why is it "surplus"? The paper strips inside the bowls look like pieces cut out and discarded — therefore unneeded or "surplus"—from a formally more traditional text. The work, then, may be intended to

⁶³ For an introduction to Ono's art, see Schwendener. Also, Takahashi discusses the connection of Cha's works to Ono's in more detail, and she has a different discussion of Surplus Novel. See Takahashi 55-62.

show what a lot of representations of Asian women may have left out or gotten wrong. Does cross-cultural representation not often involve the imagined, fictional, the “novel”? Moreover, the image of the bowl in literary and artistic texts often has immense social and cultural implications. Using actual bowls here to “contain” a woman’s voice, Cha seems to represent the restraining domestic sphere to which women are often confined. Cha is probably aware of the bowl’s symbolic association with women as the passive receptacle in the Freudian sense. Nevertheless, she gives a joking and lightly sarcastic tone to the woman speaker, as if to problematize and challenge those evocations. In this sense, the bowl may be the bearer of potential critiques of traditional gender roles as well.

In addition, the small bowls with strips of paper inside look like miniature noodle bowls, stereotypically seen in so-called East Asian cuisine, as if reflecting the essentialized visual representation of ethnicity in popular culture. On still another level, Cha visually presents her story as material for consumption in the noodle bowls. The design seems especially interesting, considering the loaded word “surplus” in the title. Easily associated with the term “surplus value” in Marxist critique, the word “surplus” may also recall the notion of “surplus repression,” which the philosopher and Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse develops in his book Eros and Civilization (1955). Marcuse, whose theories were popular with the countercultural movement in the 1960s, defines “surplus repression” as “the restrictions necessitated by social domination” (35).⁶⁴ Cha’s image of the “shoe shine man” in the poem is associated with the lower-class urban life, and the repetitive use of “ain’t” in the poem is worth noting, too, as a usage

⁶⁴ Combining Marxist critique of capitalism and alienated labor and Freud’s theory about the repression of instincts, Marcuse’s theory marks the social or external component of human repression that Freud fails to note in discussing instinctual repression and historicizes the Freudian idea of repression in the twentieth-century capitalist situation. See Marcuse 35-40 and Alway 80.

commonly seen in lower-class vernacular English shared by African American and other ethnic American groups. Hinting at Marx's and Marcuse's terms, Cha's work shows a critical engagement with the consumerist society by presenting a woman's voice at the intersection of her gender, ethnic, and class identities in this society and leaves the reader pondering whether the problematic representation of Asian women in Western popular culture reveals a certain "surplus repression" imposed on women, particularly ethnic minority women.

For Cha, the media and methodology of creation are never transparent but part of her exploration of racial and gender politics in art. Her particular attention to the materiality of art needs to be read in the broader cultural and political contexts in which she worked. Intermedia, interdisciplinary artistic activities became prevalent in Europe and America in the 1960s and thrived in the 1970s, precisely when Cha came of age as a poet and an artist, while studying and producing performance art, visual art, films, literary and theoretical writings in Berkeley, Paris, San Francisco, and New York. It was a time when experimental art practices were informed by the political struggles of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the feminist movement. How, then, does Cha's intermedia art, which is often deeply concerned about issues regarding race, gender and transnational migration, relate to and differ from other avant-garde intermedia artists active in Europe and America at that time? Also importantly, what impact will this multi-contextual reading have on our understanding of Cha as an Asian American author?

The composer, poet, and artist Dick Higgins first discusses the term "intermedia" in Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia, a collection of essays written between the 1960s and the 1980s. Higgins briefly defines the intermedia in theater, visual

arts, and music as “a conceptual fusion of scenario, visuality and, often enough, audio elements” and argues that intermedia work eschews approaching from any single medium it involves (27). He differentiates intermedia art from “mixed media” such as opera which uses multiple but “separate” media in such a way that “one knows which is which” (24). His brief introduction touches upon many artistic forms popular at the time, including visual poetry, experimental performance art, and Fluxus, an international artistic trend active in the 1960s and 1970s that blends elements including music, performance, and writing. In 1994 W. J. T. Mitchell’s Picture Theory provided a broad study of what he calls “imagetext,” or the “composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text” (89). With this concept he merges Higgins’ “intermedia” and “mixed media” and covers a wide range of works from William Blake’s art and poetry to Hollywood films to critical writings by Roland Barthes and Edward Said. His chapter on the avant-garde artist Robert Morris, who like Higgins was also involved in Fluxus, provides a detailed illustration for Higgins’s brief introduction and a useful methodology for studying avant-garde intermedia work. Mitchell emphasizes that the key question in reading these works is “to ask what the function of specific forms of heterogeneity might be” in specific historical contexts (100).

Cha’s works are examples of intermedia in Higgins’s sense, as her remarkable combination of elements from various media always challenges attempts to categorize her art and often forces her readers to reconsider or discard entirely established notions of genres, borders, and traditions. Surplus Novel, for example, fuses fictional, poetic, and visual art in such a way that makes the piece an intriguing case for us to engage the possibilities of what Mitchell calls a “form of heterogeneity.” What Mitchell says about

Robert Morris's installations is appropriate to her as well: "one has to do some hard thinking, some serious talking to oneself or a friend in the presence of this work. One has to understand the dialogue provoked by the objects *in situ* as part of what the works are" (249). In other words, Morris's art requires active thinking and even research work from the spectator and qualifies as what Roland Barthes calls a "writerly text": it involves the reader in such a creative reading process that he or she may become part of the work's creation (S/Z 4-5). Cha's intermedia texts are intended to do the same thing. In an unpublished "Artist's Statement," she summarizes her work in this way: "The audience-spectator is a major consideration, from conception to realization of the piece. She/He holds a privileged place in that She/He is the receptor and/or activator central to an exchange or dialogue."⁶⁵ In the case of Surplus Novel, her audience is expected to take the paper slips out of the bowl, read the words, think about and perhaps even research the allusions in order to understand the artistic and political implications of the work. In this way, the reader's participation becomes a significant part of the "realization" of the work.

However, while contextualizing Cha's work in these descriptions and theorizations of intermedia of the 1970s and the 1980s, one inevitably notices that neither Higgins nor Mitchell pays much attention to women writers and artists or feminist thought of the time. At one point in his book, Higgins mentions the Japanese experimental composer Mieko Shiomi's "intuitive" art in passing while discussing Fluxus, but does not discuss how her work relates to the international community of Fluxus artists (99). He acknowledges Yoko Ono as a great artist on some other occasions but considers her only marginally linked to the Fluxus group of which he himself was a part. Mitchell certainly acknowledges that racial, class and gender dynamics play significant roles in the

⁶⁵ The "Artist's Statement" is from the Cha archive at Berkeley Art Museum.

art work he discusses, but for him female artists are negligible when compared with the numerous male ones he discusses. The only woman authors he discusses are Charlotte Bronte and Toni Morrison, but rather briefly compared with his usually detailed and lengthy discussions of male artists and authors (199, 202-207). He only touches on gender on a few occasions, one of which is his brief discussion of The Colonial Harem, a study of the French colonial postcards representing Algerian women by Malek Alloula, a male scholar (308-312). Like Barthes's book on photography, which Mitchell reads closely, Mitchell's reading reveals a masculine perspective: women appear — if they do at all — only in the imagetexts by male authors and analyzed and interpreted by him, the male critic.⁶⁶ Gender issues, particularly those regarding the identity of women of color and the representation of women in history, are some of the key concerns of Cha's works. If her (mis-)identification with Ono in Surplus Novel, in an apparently playful style, leads us to see the problematic representation of Asian women, her works Exilée and Dictée, which I will examine in the following sections, more directly present the poignancy of the experience of Korean and Korean American women with more use of visual or cinematic images.

It is precisely Cha's frequent invocation of cinematic elements that makes her work reach beyond Higgins's and Mitchell's models. Higgins says little about experimental cinema in his introduction to intermedia art, although he himself directed and shot two avant-garde films and categorized them as Fluxus works (Kostelanetz 14-15). Mitchell studies film as a major representative of "imagetext," yet his focus on twentieth-century Hollywood film confines his notion of imagetext to the boundaries of traditional cinema. In their discussions of the intermedia, they both fail to note the avant-

⁶⁶ For a discussion of Barthes's male-centered perspective, see Mix 21.

garde feminist filmmaking of the 1970s, which engages in extensive intermedia experimentation and provides a connection for understanding Cha's art. An experimental video artist and filmmaker, Cha is today viewed as a "godmother" of Korean American women's cinema (H. Lee 136). The aesthetics of montage is an often-noted element in Cha's works. The poet and critic Brian Kim Stefans, noting Dictée's presentation of a complex combination of texts and images in a manner similar to cinematic montage, declares Cha a poet who "approach[es] literature as a filmmaker" (53). In Exilée and Dictée, Cha's poetic writings play a significant role, as in Surplus Novel, but her use of cinematic elements in these works enables greater interaction between the visual and the textual.

In her many exhibitions and performances in the Bay Area in the mid 1970s, and through the women artist groups active in the area, Cha gained access to emerging feminist film theories such as Laura Mulvey's famous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Lewallen 10). Experimental feminist filmmakers in Europe and the United States at this time were exploring ways of re-presenting women and unsettling the "pleasure" of traditional narrative cinema.⁶⁷ Ono, whom Cha refers to in Surplus Novel, was active in experimental filmmaking, too. Yvonne Rainer, an important choreographer of modern dance in the 1960s and 1970s, turned to experimental filmmaking in the mid-1970s and produced films that mix multiple voices, printed texts, and complex imagery.

⁶⁷ Published in 1975, Mulvey's essay for the first time criticized the pattern of classical Hollywood films as always representing women as objects of desire while putting the audience into a male subject position. As Teresa de Lauretis and some other feminist film theorists have noted, Mulvey's criticism does not account for the women viewers in the audience or pay any attention to woman filmmakers; it therefore leaves open the questions about how women, especially feminist, filmmakers may be able to resist and transform the dominant discourses. Indeed, about the possibility of intervention, Mulvey only mentions in passing at the end of her essay the avant-garde cinema, which she believes can "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment" (2192), and she does not explore in detail how avant-garde filmmaking can provide an alternative, feminist model.

Kaja Silverman has noted that in Rainer's and other feminist films of the time the disembodied female voice becomes a useful and liberating tool to challenge the classic Hollywood construction of woman "as body" (165-186). Cha was a fan of Rainer's dance performances and was probably familiar with Rainer's early films as well (Lewallen 6). Cha's focus on women in her intermedia and video works and her interest in non-narrative, non-traditional cinema link her to this movement in feminist film. Her video works, including Mouth to Mouth and Exilée, often feature a disembodied female voice-over that she performs herself just as in Rainer's films. In her other intermedia works such as Dictée, where cinematic elements are constantly invoked, multiple and disembodied female voices play a significant role as well. Maya Deren, an American avant-garde filmmaker and film theorist of the 1940s and 1950s, might be another influence. Cha included an important essay by Deren in the film theory anthology, Apparatus—Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings, which she edited and published in 1980. Deren's films anticipated the later feminist call for an alternative to the traditional linear narrative of classic Hollywood films and influenced many experimental women filmmakers in the 1970s (Jackson 67). Her concept of the "film poem" is especially relevant to Cha's Exilée.

Though deeply influenced by these feminist theories and practices, Cha was different from her Euro-American contemporaries with her particular concern about Korean and Korean American women's exilic identity and her attention to issues of ethnicity and race. Reading Cha's work in the contexts of the Intermedia art and avant-garde feminist film theory and practice in Europe and America of the 1970s, one cannot ignore the emerging Asian American literature and art, to which Cha's work was related

in a complicated way. Asian American authors and poets such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Lawson Inada and Janice Mirikitani started gaining critical attention in the 1970s. Like them, Cha had been interested in issues of ethnic and racial identity from early on. One of her friends at Berkeley was Yong Soon Min who would become a highly acclaimed installation artist in the 1980s and continue to be an important figure in Asian American art. Yet, as the Asian American literary critic Shelley Sunn Wong has pointed out, Cha's avant-garde style, as demonstrated in Dictée, was quite an "anomaly" in the context of a rising Asian American movement. Dictée not only differs from those Asian American literary works that center on claiming America, or trying to make a place for Asians in the United States, but it also deploys unconventional literary forms (103). Compared with these literary works that highlight immediate social and political realities, Cha did not receive much critical attention initially from either Asian American or non-Asian American critics. Her work not only revolves around issues within the United States but also reveals transnational concerns. For example, one of the key questions her work explores is how colonialism and inter-national wars and power struggles have affected the construction of ethnic identity for Korean Americans. Although her works deal with how to represent Asian American women and the difficulty of coming to terms with such an identity, ultimately, they are more interested in the problematics of such concepts as "representation" and "history" in dominant discourses. Suplus Novel makes one rethink the representation of Ono as an image and questions its representativeness for Asian American women in the public mind, but more fundamentally, it tries to subvert the usual ways of "representing" by breaking the taken-for-granted boundaries of such genres as novel and sculpture. Similarly situated in multiple cultural and political contexts, Cha's

Exilée and Dictée demonstrate her formal innovation and its ideological implications more thoroughly. Although they subtly echo other Asian American texts of the time, the works explore the politics of language use and the subversive potential of artistic experimentation on a deeper level.

Exilée: Cine-Poem or Poetry Film?

Maya Deren, whose writing *Cha* included in Apparatus, called her own films “CINE-POEMS” (Jackson 71). Renata Jackson in a study of Deren’s films argues, that for Deren “[t]rue film art does not consist of linear narratives, animated paintings, or documentary realism; for Deren it must be the result of more poetic approaches” (64). Deren believed that, like poetry, avant-garde films constituted “a ‘vertical’ development” which she defined as a work of “plunging down or a construction that is based on the intent of the moment” and “a logic of a central emotion or idea that attracts to itself even disparate images which contain that central core, which they have in common. This, to me, is the structure of poetry” (qtd. in MacDonald “Poetry and the Film” 211, 208). Her visual “poems” composed of symbolic images explore women’s, particularly her own, interior psychology. In the 1970s, avant-garde filmmakers and film theorists introduced a related but different concept called “poetry film,” which shows a more direct relationship between film and poetry. The three basic elements of these films include “a verbal poetic statement in narrated or captioned form;” “stills, moving or animated, abstract or recognizable;” and sound (MacDonald “Poetry and Avant-Garde Film” 12). *Cha* was probably aware of the first Poetry Film festival organized in San Francisco by filmmaker and poet Herman Berlandt in 1975. The influence of both Deren’s “film poems” and

contemporary “poetry films” can be seen in her video and film works, among which Exilée is an intriguing case.

A year after Cha made her first visit to Korea in 1979 some seventeen years after her family’s departure (Roth 155), she published the poem “Exilée” in Hotel, an anthology of writings by artists. Shortly afterwards she screened for the first time the video and film installation work Exilée in San Francisco, using as the voice-over text the poem of the same title. During the original screening of Exilée, a film was projected on a screen, at the center of which a video player was placed and operated at the same time.⁶⁸

Exilée is perplexing in more than one way. It is composed of a series of still images against the background of Cha’s mesmerizing reading of the poem. It works at the level of anti-narrative like most of the experimental films and other intermedia works of the 1960s and 1970s. Just as Surplus Novel confuses and intrigues its viewers with its form, so does this work raise questions about genres and categories: Is it a work meant to be read as a poem—a “cine-poem”—or a film with poetic scripts—a “poetry film”? How are Cha’s word fragments, clouds, plane seats, teapots, and changes of sunlight in empty rooms—“disparate images” to use Deren’s term— in the work related to each other, and to the poem in the female voice-over? Also, in Mitchell’s terms, what is the function of this particular “form of heterogeneity”? I argue that the intended difficulty of naming on the formal level echoes the work’s thematic concern with the crisis of naming one

⁶⁸ According to Stephanie Cannizzo, the curator of the Cha Collection at Berkeley, “A lot of the film footage was filmed in Cha’s apartment in Berkeley, where she set up her camera and filmed the shadow of a bamboo tree as it moved across the wall in the afternoon sun. Also, she filmed an open window with curtains blowing in the wind at night. These images play simultaneously and overlap with the video” (From Cannizzo’s email to the author on November 23, 2009). See Figure 2, also from Cannizzo’s email, for a glimpse of the film screen. Framing her video images in the filmed scenes, is Cha trying to highlight her own point of view as mediated by her particular geographical and cultural location? The video Exilée now hosted in the Cha archive at Berkeley contains mainly the image sequence of the video portion of the original work. I therefore focus on this portion as well as the poem “Exilée.”

encounters in the experience of colonization and exile. More fundamentally, the images and Cha's reading of the poem, dependent upon and articulated through each other, fuses into a poetic piece that effectively engages the audience in the trauma of exile.

The difficulty and uncertainty of naming is central from the very beginning of the work. The title word "exilée" is the singular, feminine past participle of the verb "exiler" (to exile) in French and means "(feminine) exiled." A French word, it nevertheless has the English word "exile" embedded in it, doubly indicating the passive state of being forced to leave the original homeland. It can be seen as either a modifier signifying a state of exile or, if used with an article ("la" in French), a collective noun referring to the people, specifically women, in the state of exile. The title word thus makes evident Cha's focus on women in exile, though its actual referent remains unspecified. Given her own experience of traveling back to Korea in 1979, the term might very well invoke her own feeling as a woman exiled from her original homeland. Yet, throughout the work, the speaker does not name, identify, or present any woman in particular with any visual portrait or verbal description. The title, with its rather vague referent, seems to recall the way women were often treated in the writing of both Korean and Western histories: rarely named and more often described in a generic way.⁶⁹

Both in the poem and in the video, Cha shows a diagram of words right after the title, dividing the word "exilée" into several parts and thus visualizing the connotations of this title:

E X I L

E X I L E

⁶⁹ For the treatment of women in Korean history writings, see related articles in Ko, et al. For that in Western tradition, see Sponberg, for example.

I L E

É

É E (“Exilée” 38)

Here we see “EXILE” and its older form in English “EXIL;” “ILE,” island in French; “É,” the suffix for past participles forming the passive voice; and its feminine form “ÉE.” Similar diagramming can be seen in her other video works such as Vidéoème and her written piece included in Apparatus titled “Commentaire.” Breaking a word up into multiple words or word fragments, she calls attention to the variable signification and complicated connotations of language. With the word “exile,” she foregrounds the linguistic representation of passivity and femininity in French, a language she learned when she enrolled in a Catholic school in San Francisco after her family emigrated to the United States. Historically, it was also a language of spiritual or religious colonization for Koreans, as it was linked to the imperialist history of French Catholic missionary activities in Korea since the nineteenth century (Lowe 148). In arguing for the importance of studying “image” and “text” as inseparable categories, Mitchell has said, “Writing, in its physical, graphic form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal, the ‘imagetext’ incarnate” (95). Cha’s use of words as film image precisely shows written language as a “suturing of the visual and the verbal.” She says in the unpublished “Artist’s Statement:”

The main body of my work is with Language, “looking for the roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue.”⁷⁰

Since having been forced to learn foreign languages more “consciously” at a later age, there has existed a different perception and orientation toward language. Certain areas that continue to hold interest for me are: grammatical structures of a language, syntax. How words and meaning are *constructed* in the language system itself, by function or

⁷⁰The origin of the quote is unknown and often quoted as Cha’s own words.

usage, and how transformation is brought about through manipulation, processes such as changing the syntax, isolation, removing from context, repetition, and reduction to minimal units.

Here she mentions the experience of being “forced to learn foreign languages,” alluding to the migration of her family and the alienating feeling of learning a new language as exiles or immigrants. Yet Cha makes use of this “conscious” learning experience in her art, and the detachment she seems to maintain from the acquired languages enables her to reach to the root of words and reveal the histories and politics embedded in them.

I have drawn upon Edward Said’s concept of “exile” when reading Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry and have shown how Ali echoes Said in seeing exile as a painful yet intellectually stimulating situation. In this chapter on Cha, the topic of exile should be seen in light of Cha’s exploration of women’s position in history. It becomes clear that Said’s formulation fails to show exilic experiences as always already gendered. James Clifford’s view of women in diaspora seems more illuminating: “Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful—struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies” (259). With references to writings by Asian American women, “Black” and “Third World” women, Clifford further shows that women in diaspora have to confront and negotiate different worlds and “discrepant histories” (260). Clifford’s theory may be over-generalizing, lacking attention to the specificity of each of the authors and groups he mentions; nevertheless, his emphasis on the gendered aspect of exilic experiences is helpful for understanding Cha’s focus on women in exile.

Cha’s use of the French word as the title suggests an attempt to deal with the “discrepant histories” she finds herself in. The Cha family left South Korea in 1962 when

Theresa Hak Kyung, the middle of five children, was eleven years old (Roth 151). It was a time when Korea was still in the political turmoil that would last for another two decades. A wave of Korean migration to the United States occurred in the decade following the Korean War (1950-1953), consisting of many professional workers and students fleeing the war-devastated homeland for better economic and educational opportunity (Noland 61). According to the historian Ji-Yeon Yuh, in the Korean Peninsula, “war was an ever-present threat in the decades following the 1953 armistice that ended military hostilities, and those who could grabbed the chance to escape” (280). Cha’s parents, who had been forced to learn Japanese and to flee to China because of the Japanese occupation of Korea earlier in the twentieth century (Roth 151), probably chose to migrate to the United States after witnessing and experiencing numerous wars and political movements in their original homeland. They sent their children to Catholic school after settling down in San Francisco, where the children studied French, Latin, and other traditional “Western” subjects. The family’s experience of multiple exiles therefore linked Cha to the history of Korea’s subjection to Western imperialism and later to Japanese colonization, the history of the Korean War and of the Korean American community. The title word “exilée” is therefore a starting point with which Cha responded artistically to the multiple traumatic displacements.

Shortly after the video Exilée begins, a sequence of images of the brush-stroked letter “X” appears on the screen and slowly fades into each other, with the voice-over reading this passage:

BEFORE NAME
NO NAME
NONE OTHER
NONE OTHER THAN GIVEN

LAST ABSENT FIRST
 NAME
WITHOUT NAME
A NO NAME
 NO NAME
BETWEEN NAME
NAMED (“Exilée” 138)

The beginning letter of the Greek root “xeno-” meaning alien or stranger, the “X” has become a rather universal symbol for the unknown, a pictorial annotation for “no name.” Also, as the image evokes the act of deleting and crossing out, it may also make one think about how migration and exile can mean a loss of the original name and identity. The combination of the uncaptioned image and the fragmentary lines, with the intentional absence of referent, forces the audience into an experience of repetitive negation and uncertainty, both visually and aurally. The recurring phrase “NO NAME,” in light of Cha’s concern with women, recalls Kingston’s widely anthologized piece “No Name Woman” from The Woman Warrior, first published in 1975. There, a woman is stripped of her name as punishment for disloyalty and betrayal under the power of patriarchy. Her story becomes something to tell in order to warn young women within her Chinese family of the danger of disloyal acts. The narrator in the book, a Chinese American girl who remains unnamed herself, tries to come to terms with the story by retelling and rethinking it in a different cultural context. Although not a narrative like Kingston’s, Cha’s image-voice combination here also leads the audience to thinking about who has the power of naming and un-naming and whether the uttering itself can be a way of subverting that power.

In her earlier works, Cha has repeatedly used unnamed images and photos in exploring the theme of exile. The artist’s book titled presence/absence (1975) is a good

example.⁷¹ The book opens with a mysterious lyric line, “Water fills up all the empty places,” and is composed of more than thirty pages of reprinting of a photo of Cha and her four siblings in their childhood, which was probably taken after their exile from Korea but before their arrival in America.⁷² As the pages go by, the reprinting becomes increasingly vague, and the photo moves farther and farther towards the left side of the page until the image disappears completely. All one can see at the end of the book are traces of photo margins and probably marks of water damage and photocopying ink (Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6). In fact, the pages look very much like those in a flipbook. “A true form of microcinema,” a flipbook shows a cinematic illusion of motion when the edges of the pages are quickly flipped through (Ferrington). The cinematic effect of Cha’s book visualizes the gradual disappearing family photo on the one hand, as if representing the exile of the children in the geographical sense. On the other hand, the book presents for the viewer a temporal process as well, the fading of a memory as time passes. In the photo Cha and her siblings are dressed formally and look quite serious; the lack of color and the blurring as a result of repeated copying further give the picture a solemn feeling. Their “presence” thus looks transient and vulnerable under the threat of the unidentified reprinting process. In this sense, the “water” in the book’s opening line may refer to the journey on the sea they must have gone through and perhaps also to the traces of water damage often left on old photos. By “absence,” Cha may refer to her parents who are absent in this photo but whose life, linked with the history of modern

⁷¹ The book has a minimalist cover design, with only the two words “absence” and “presence” etched on the corners of the black covers (Figure 3). The title presence/absence is given in the Cha collection at Berkeley and various exhibitions of Cha’s work. However, I think the binding of the book suggests “absence/presence” as a more appropriate title since the cover where the word “absence” appears seems more like the front cover.

⁷² See the introduction to the book in the online Cha Collection at <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf2g5001r7/?order=1&brand=oac>.

Korea, continuously inspired her works. Moreover, the word “absence” also points to the unannotated and decontextualized condition of the photo. Leaving more questions than answers about the photo, the absence of verbal explanation forces the reader to focus on *how* the visual media of photography and printing operate here instead of merely *what* they tell.

In Exilée, decontextualized photos are used, too—still images of unnamed objects and scenes—to further explore the loss of name, identity, and memory due to transnational migration. An unforgettable sequence of images shows clouds, usually seen from airplane windows during a flight (Figure 7), and empty plane seats. The accompanying voice-over meticulously counts off the time of a journey. As noted above, Cha made the film after her first trip back to Korea after seventeen years, and what is shown here likely originates from her own journey. While Kingston’s narrator in The Woman Warrior remains in America and asks herself what “Chinese” truly is and how different it is from “the movies” (13), Cha’s narrator, the invisible exiled woman behind the female voice-over, is clearer about her alienation from the original home and her own liminal position as a result of transnational migration.

ten hours twenty three minuits
sixteen hours ahead of this time

ten hours twenty two minuits
sixteen hours ahead of this time

ten hours twenty one minuit
sixteen hours ahead of this time⁷³ (“Exilée” 141)

⁷³ Cha’s use of “minuit” and “minuits” (French word for “midnight”) instead of “minutes” in the poem is mysterious, though her reading in the film sound exactly to be “minutes.” According to Lawrence Rinder, “Cha’s uniquely ambiguous relationship to language makes it impossible to say with certainty whether she meant these words to be understood as English or French, or whether she was simply suggesting a fault in the narrator’s spelling ability” (31).

The time difference between the West Coast of the United States and Korea is repeated three times, and the distance between the two countries in this counting shows both a geographical and a temporal dimension. The monotony of the counting, intensified by the plain images, vividly evokes a long, tiring, and psychologically agonizing transnational trip. The following passage further shows a pain that does not come as much from the physical journey as from the sense of loss and uncertainty peculiar to the exilic condition.

Backwards. from backwards from the back way back.
to This This phantom image/non-images
almost non-images without images. Each ante-
moment moment no more. no more a moment
a moment no duration. no time. phantom no visible
no name no duration no memory no reflection no echo (“Exilée”143)

For the exiled woman, the journey to the place where she was born is supposed to be a journey “back home,” yet the language here, fraught with negations, does not point to a concrete image of home at all. The female reading voice, in its unchanged peaceful tone tinted with melancholy, seems to be talking about a “homeland” that is already lost in memory save for “phantom” traces.

Throughout Exilée, there are recurring images of the shadows of window frames on the wall, a teacup on a mat, shoes on a doorway, and lines of laundry in the wind (Figure 8, Figure 9), all of which remain uncaptioned on screen and unnamed in the voice-over and appear to be rather out-of-context. The sense of disjunction thus caused precisely illustrates a past fragmentary in mind, or what Salman Rushdie calls an “imaginary homeland.” As Rushdie says, exiles are always haunted by a feeling of loss and uncertainty, and for them, physical alienation from the original home means vague images in fallible memory, and what they can create in mind or in art is merely “fiction” or “imaginary homelands” instead of actual ones (10). Also describing such a situation,

Said says of his photos of Palestinians, “exile is a series of portraits without names, without context” (After the Last Sky 12). Cha’s use of uncaptioned still images in the film exactly illustrates this exilic imaginary relation to the homeland. At one point, when images of plane seats and laundry in a backyard appear on the film screen, the audience hears her reading these lines:

Of previous. souvenirs. remnants. previously
recent. recent past. in tenses. in conjugations.
in numbers. in chronologies.
plural pasts taken place beforehand
in articulations tongues
taken place beforehand
abolition effacement
the one place the one thing the only thing
the only place replaced with tenses with conjugations
with numbers with chronologies
plural pasts taken place beforehand (“Exilée” 147)

The staccato rhythm of the first three lines, highlighted with extended space between phrases on the page and with deliberate pauses in the voice-over, adds to the sense of fragmentation thematized by the images of the “souvenirs” and “remnants” in memory. The outflow of grammatical terms — “tenses,” “conjugations,” “numbers,” “plural pasts” — in the following lines indicates how overwhelming it can be when the past is “replaced” by new ways of thinking in a new language. Without naming anyone or anything specifically, Cha’s seemingly vague and unconnected images and poetic lines enable her audience to feel alongside the speaker the profound sadness about the impossibility of retrieving what is lost in exile. In a postcard to Yong Soon Min during her actual travel to Korea in 1979, Cha wrote, “here I am finally, childhood gone, apparently I am forced to experience as adult” (qtd in Lewallen 10). She has lost the “one place,” “the only place” that is the homeland in her childhood memory. Her still images

and disjunctive lines in Exilée, marked with repetitive negations, engage the audience both visually and aurally in an experience of loss.

Interestingly, half way through, the video starts to repeat itself, with the second half completely repeating the first one both visually and aurally. One wonders if this filmic loop is intended to mimic memory and the act of recollection (re-collection) and therefore suggests an effort to seek the possibility of reclaiming and renaming. The turning point in the middle of the film is worth noting. While the chief section of Exilée makes one think about the exile's loss of old names and identities, the poetic text at this point becomes concerned about the naming and re-naming of the country:

some door some night some window lit some train some
city some nation some peoples
re Named
u t t e r ly by chance by luck by hazard otherwise.
any door any night any window lit any train any city
any nation any peoples some name any name to a
given name ("Exilée" 159)

Images of lines of laundry and glimpses of a Korean city appear on the screen again. Cha's voice-over reads this passage in a rhythm slightly more rapid than usual, suggesting a feeling of indignation about the histories of naming and renaming Korea experienced in the twentieth century, first under the Japanese rule and then as a result of Cold War politics. The Soviet Union and the United States' disarming of Japanese troops in the North and South parts of the Korean Peninsula at the end of World War II soon became the basis for the division of Korea and the following naming of the two separate countries, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea, and the Republic of Korea, or South Korea, in 1948 under the influence of the two superpowers (Buzo 46-67). In Dictée Cha would write further about the poignant history of how parts of a land

become enemies of each other, due to the competition between the Soviet Union and the United States. Here, she voices her feeling with the use of uncaptioned images and unspecified modifiers like “some” and “any” without specifying the case of Korea, as if to generalize the situation and provide room for her audience’s free association. Indeed, countless places have experienced name changes due to political transformations. Yet, on the other hand, the words “some” and “any,” with their intentional unspecification, seem careless with a lack of regard for the extremely poignant situation of a nation’s loss of name and naming power under the military and political control from the outside. The ironic effect gets even more intensified in the line “u t t e r ly by chance by luck by hazard otherwise” in the middle of the passage. Hidden behind the images and the poetic lines are these questions: what determines whether a nation gains or loses “uttering” power? How do we see and write a family’s or a nation’s history in which complex political relations were covered by words like “chance,” “luck” or “hazard”? How does an exiled woman’s liminal position affect the author’s perception of the changed or lost identity of a nation?

In another letter to Yong Soon Min from Korea in 1979, Cha wrote, “I am in spite of everything seeing the great presence of women, the woman’s space, the woman holding the weight of all Asian societies, or is that a grandiose generalization?” (qtd. in Lewallen 10). Although *Exilée* does not explicitly or substantially articulate this feeling of Cha’s, the film weaves suggestive images and her own voicing of lyric lines into a visual poem that demonstrates an attempt to record and to “utter” a woman’s perspective. Moreover, it is remarkable to note most of the images in the film, from the teacup to the laundry lines, evoke domestic spaces, the focus of a woman’s life in traditional Korean

culture. There is no woman figure in the film, but the images appear to be shot from the point of view of a woman. For example, the angle from which the cup is seen, or the way that shoes are placed neatly at the doorway, seems to reveal the viewpoint of someone who is deeply familiar with and attentive to domestic surroundings. In Picture Theory, Mitchell has given a favorable reading of Said's illustrative images of exile in After the Last Sky, where Palestinian women are often found at the center of photos about domestic spaces and portrayed as "associated with 'the land' and the idea of home... as the keepers of images in the Palestinian interior" (Mitchell 317). Unlike Said's highlighting of women's "presence," Cha reveals the significance of women in the memory and imagination about a nation through images that only suggest presence. Thus, her audience is left thinking about both the overtly expressed and the suggested, both the seen and the unseen. Cha would write about Korean women and women in exile more directly in Dictée. With a more profound historical perspective and a more adventurous form, the later book goes further than Exilée and clearly illustrates what some feminist theorists would say at the end of the twentieth century: "Women are both of and not of the nation. Between woman and nation is, perhaps, the space or zone where we can deconstruct these monoliths and render them more historically nuanced and accountable to politics. The figure of 'woman' participates in the imaginary of the nation-state beyond the purview of patriarchies" (Alarcón et al. 12).

Dictée: a Visual Counter-Epic

Like Surplus Novel and Exilée, the book Dictée attracts and puzzles its readers with its uncategorizable form. Scholars have placed it in diverse genres: a "novel" (Sue J.

Kim), an “autobiography” (Phu), a poetic work within and against both lyric and epic traditions (Wong) or simply an “epic” (Mix, Park), an “artist’s book” and “art-text” (Takahashi), and an “imagetext” (Ohnesorge). The book’s intermedia experimentation indeed provides multiple possibilities of formal interpretation. I see Dictée as primarily an intermedia work, whose visual aspects are as important as its textual features. Cha’s use of visual materials such as unannotated maps and photos as well as decontextualized film stills interact with her poetic writings, producing a book whose intermedia form leads the reader to investigate the hidden histories of Korea’s relations to the United States and to think about how imperial power can manipulate the ways in which the past is written and unwritten. More specifically, Cha’s use of images plays a significant role in making the book a “visual counter-epic” that subverts traditional, male-dominated modes of history and enables reconsideration of the limits and possibilities of writing.

To read Dictée in the frame of “epic,” a brief review of the literary tradition of “epic” is necessary. In his now widely cited theory of the novel, M. M. Bakhtin defines the epic in Western tradition as a genre that, narrated from the single voice of the epic singer, idealizes an “absolute past” (13). This national past is usually marked by “heroic” warfare and cannot be rewritten but only accepted with “reverence” (Bakhtin 17). Also, the genre “does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation” but only an “official” and conclusive view of “sacred” history (Bakhtin 20). While Bakhtin views the epic as an “absolutely completed and finished generic form” (14), the genre has actually continued to be revised. For example, a tradition of twentieth-century epic initiated by Ezra Pound has reinvented the classical genre. Pound defines the epic as “a poem including history.” His famous long work The Cantos opens with his own salute to

the classical epic, a translation of a passage from The Odyssey. His opening lines “And then went down to the ship / Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea” begins *in medias res*, perfectly following that narrative convention of the epic (3). Yet, throughout, Pound replaces the classical epic’s unified narrative perspective with a rich array of voices and histories and revises its focus on a national past with more critical thinking on modern society. William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and other important poets, following Pound, also produced epics of their own. More recently, poets have continued rethinking the genre. Reading the Language poet Barrett Watten’s 1998 collection Bad History, the poet and critic Philip Metres finds a new “counter-epic” that evokes the Poundian epic tradition yet “counters its own epic tendencies” by critiquing media representations of the Gulf War. From the classical epic as theorized by Bakhtin to Watten’s postmodern counter-epic, epic seems to have been dominated by male writers and male characters. As Susan Friedman has long reminded us, literary genres are often gender-specific; her influential essay on Elizabeth Browning and H.D. in 1986 has shown how these two woman poets have written long narrative poems that “self-consciously reformulated epic conventions to suit their female vision and voice” (203).

Cha’s Dictée begins with a frontispiece that presents a photographic reproduction of Korean Hangul etched in stone. Translated as “Mother / I miss you / I am hungry / I want to go home,”⁷⁴ it immediately introduces the familiar epic themes of exile and a journey home (Figure 10). Also in epic fashion, the book opens with invocations to the muse, “O Muse, tell me the story / Of all these things” (7). Furthermore, the main body of

⁷⁴ There is some debate about who actually made the inscription—a Korean exile forced into labor by Japanese colonizers or by Korean nationalists in Japan. It is not clear if Cha was aware of the controversy when deciding to use the photo as the frontispiece. See Kang 99. In either case, the emotional and thematic significance of the writing cannot be denied.

the book is divided into nine sections titled with the names of the nine muses (though Cha changes one of them, “Euterpe,” the muse of music, into “Elitere,” a muse of lyric poetry), bringing to mind Hesiod’s list of the Muses in Theogony, a work also related to the Homeric epic tradition.⁷⁵ Thus, Dictée sets itself within the frame of the classical epic. Throughout the book, however, pieces about the modern history of Korea written in multiple female voices challenge the genre’s traditional pattern of recounting from a male-centered perspective a national past centered on male heroes. Cha goes further than the modern male poets’ models as well as Browning’s and H.D.’s long narrative poems in reinventing the epic genre. As my reading will show below, the book provides a visual counter-epic — similar to Metres’s theorization — with a series of images that dynamically presents women as active, though often tragic, participants in history, calls attention to the atrocities of war, and foregrounds a non-linear Benjaminian mode of representing history.

Critics of Cha’s Dictée have noted the book’s epic tendencies and its revision of the genre. Wong, in one of the earliest readings of the book, has perceptively noted that Cha critiques and revises both the epic and the lyric traditions with a “poetics of cleaving” (138). In a recent essay Josephine Park calls the book “an experimental epic” and further enriches Wong’s point with an insightful comparative reading of Cha’s poetic passages against Baudelaire’s lyric poems and Pound’s opening of The Cantos. Rather than attaching similar importance to the epic and lyric modes of the book, I would read

⁷⁵ Recent studies of classical epics have shown a lot of intertextual affiliations between Homer and Hesiod, and scholars have noted that in spite of the generally accepted Bakhtinian definition of the epic, Hesiod’s work was done along the same lines as Homer’s epics in terms of language and poetic form. Therefore, although Hesiod’s texts are not very long narrative poems about heroes and war like Homer’s, they may actually belong to the same tradition of “epos” (epic poetry). For this, see Rosen. It is uncertain how Cha read Hesiod, but her invocations of the Muses definitely calls forth a comparison between the treatment of women figures in the classic texts and in her own way of rewriting history. See K. Lee, for an intertextual reading of Dictée and Theogony.

the book as a counter-epic overall, in which lyric moments are embedded as integral parts of Cha's exploration of history writing. Even the "Elitere Lyric Poetry" section of the book is set within the frame of historical exploration and opens with a historical photo. As I will show in more detail below, the apparently lyric passages in the section, as meditations on the particular historic moment portrayed in the photo, are inextricably tied to the narrative sections of the book.

Like Browning's and H.D.'s long poems in Friedman's reading, Dictée is largely an "epic" of women, questioning and critiquing the gendered roles in both Korea's patriarchal culture and the male-centered literary and cultural traditions of the West. One of the longest sections of the book, "Clio History," features Yu Guan Soon, the patriotic girl sacrificing her life in Korea's independence movement in the early twentieth century. The section "Calliope Epic Poetry" portrays Hyung Soon Huo, the author's mother, whose experience and emotions as an exile were shared by the author herself. Female figures such as St. Therese, Joan of Arc, and a re-created girl based on the Princess Pari in Korean shamanistic myth also appear as the central figures of other sections. However, more experimental than Browning's and H.D.'s feminized epics, Cha's text relies on the photos of the women as much as on writings about them. If Exilée compels one to think about the significance of women in national history with its photographic or filmic suggestions of "absence," here the portrait photos of the women foreground their "presence." The portraits make evident the necessity of re-presenting women's position in history; they also demonstrate the mediation and repurposing of the visual involved in the very act of representing.

“Clio History” opens with a portrait of Yu Guan Soon, a young girl in traditional Korean dress, followed by the biographical information on the opposite page that shows she died at the young age of 17 (Figure 11).⁷⁶ The section tells the story of how Yu, who joined the Korean independence movement in 1919 at the age of 16 and helped organize the mass demonstration on March 1, 1919, was arrested and killed as a consequence. The narration in Cha’s deceptively plain language comes alive and gains a moving effect due to Yu’s photo. There, the girl’s face, with neatly combed hair and closed mouth, reflects visually her determination and strength of character represented in the story itself. As if to emphasize the significance of the photo, the narrator comments toward the end of the section, “Time will stop for some. For them especially. Eternal time. No age. Time fixes for some. Their image, the memory of them is not given to deterioration” (37), revealing an intention to use both image and text to retain, record, and remember the girl’s history against forgetting. In an essay that theorizes the reading of portraiture in the post-9/11 age, Mieke Bal has reminded us that portraits are not simply images of individual and personal memory but texts with historical and political implications as well. Cha’s conscious use of the portrait enacts this notion that reveals the imbrication of personal, historical, and political. The photo with its text commemorates Yu as a “child revolutionary child patriot woman soldier deliverer of nation” (37).

However, the image-text combination in this case is not just about retelling history (as what happened in the past). Throughout the book Cha continuously reminds us that history is always a mediated and sometimes manipulated process of representing. What Cha intends to show with Yu’s photo here is by no means a definitive version of a national history, for it becomes clear, when the reader finishes the entire book and sees

⁷⁶ Also written as Yu Gwan-sun or Yu Kwan-sun. Yu is her family name.

the photo on the back cover, that Cha must have cut the portrait from a photo of a group of school girls and magnified it for her own use (Figure 12). Also, pages after Yu's story, a film still of Maria Falconetti's Joan of Arc from Carl Dreyer's 1928 silent film La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc appears (Figure 13) and echoes the narrative in which Yu mentions Jeanne d'Arc before her death (119). It is worth noting that Joan of Arc also was executed after trying to liberate her country from foreign occupation.⁷⁷ The film still can perhaps give the Western reader a more familiar reference through which to see the Korean martyr. Ironically, Yu, and probably Cha herself as well, might have come to know Joan of Arc through a Catholic education, which was widespread among Korean children due to French missionary's influence since the nineteenth century. In this sense, the transnational connection shown between Yu and Falconetti's Joan of Arc is not simply a call for attention to important women figures in different cultural histories; rather, it demonstrates the multiple layers of mediation that the representation of the past always involves.

In the following section, "Calliope Epic Poetry," the story of Cha's mother begins when she was eighteen years old, as if a continuation of Yu's story ended in her seventeenth year. During Japanese colonization of Korea in the early twentieth century, Cha's mother lived as an immigrant and exile in Northeastern China, a place which while under Japanese military and political control was known as "Manchuria." Her experience of hardship there represents what her country goes through during Japan's occupation. The section is framed by two photos of her mother, one at a young age and another as an older woman (Figure 14, Figure 15). Cha's mother is dressed in western-styled suits in

⁷⁷ See Barstow xiv-xx, for an introduction to the role Joan of Arc played in the French army in fighting against English domination late in the Hundred Years' War.

the younger portrait, probably because of her exiled status in China. There is a sense of determination and strength similar to the previous image of Yu. Her mouth is closed, but her eyes seem engaged in a thoughtful gaze. Her slightly tilted pose seems to suggest a rather lively character, as if she is about to move even though she is required to remain still. Her mother's "Epic" ends with a narrative about her return to Korea years after emigrating to America. "One day you raise the right hand and you are American. [...] You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. [...] You say who you are but you begin to doubt" (56-57), so Cha says about her mother, whose naturalization in America seems to have cost her her original identity as a Korean. As if to illustrate the vicissitudes of her mother's life, the photo that closes this section depicts her mother as more meditative as she dons traditional Korean dress. The wrinkles on her forehead, the frown, and her lowered eyes all give her a deep solemnness and reflect poignantly the exile's experience. Bal has said, "Negotiating the tension between public and private seems to be one of the primary goals of portraiture" (14). In this sense, the private portraits of Cha's mother become texts for public reading in Cha's book, providing a perspective from which the modern history of Korea is re-presented not as a grand narrative but as specific, detailed moments, written and rewritten in individual memories. As the creases shown on the mother's second photo remind us, documents of the past seem bound to fade and disappear; yet Cha's retrieval makes visible her own effort of writing against "deterioration" (33).

The series of portraits does not present a naïve celebration of the women's significance in history, however. The close-up portraits of the woman figures visualize their silence, with their mouths always closed; even the related figures in Western

tradition, St. Therese and Falconetti's Joan of Arc each has a rather melancholic, desperate expression. Except for Yu's photo, none of the portraits have captions or accompanying explanations, and the women, therefore, remain anonymous for most of the book. The alienating reading experience the book thus imposes on the reader precisely reflects the way women are typically treated in male-dominated traditional Korean culture and Western historiography. Ironically, it is the woman figure, silenced and forced into a passive position, that best represents the hardship that people of a colonized nation endure. At one point in the book, Cha writes to her mother, describing her mother as a representative of the whole nation, "You take what is given to you. Always do. Always have. You. Your people" (49). Silenced by killing or exile, the women nevertheless find other ways to speak. The "History" section is marked by quotations narrated in the first person pronoun, probably from Yu's writing, and the book's endnotes show that Cha has relied on her mother's journal and St. Therese's autobiography for the other sections. It is by retrieving their writing and their images from the past that the book "resurrects" the women and their voices.

Highlighting the Korean women's images and thus giving an account of modern Korean history as an epic of women, Cha is nevertheless aware of the possibly oblivious and indifferent response to her images and writings. In the "History" section, following a rather journalistic account of a massacre of Koreans by Japanese soldiers in 1907, Cha writes in the rhythm of a prose poem:

To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History's recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another. Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and

bone, to the core, to the mark, to the point where it is necessary to intervene [...]

To the others, these accounts are about (one more) distant land, like (any other) distant land, without any discernable features in the narrative, (all the same) distant like any other. (32-33)

Indeed, as Barthes has said, the reading of the photograph is “always historical;” “it depends on the reader’s ‘knowledge’ just as though it were a matter of a real language, intelligible only if one has learned the signs” (Image — Music — Text 28). How moving can an exotic, Korean woman’s portrait be to a Western reader, uninformed about the history behind the image? What kind of “recording” of Korea is available to the American readership? How much does an American audience know or care about the catastrophe happening to “other” people? With the parenthetical phrases, Cha evokes the insular, self-indulgent perspective a general readership in the West often maintains.

Cha’s thinking about readership is further shown in the “Melpomene Tragedy” section, where the visual reproduction of a map calls attention to the complicated power relations in a modern war and revises another epic tradition. The classical epic always glorifies warfare and men’s heroic achievement in it. In Cha’s text, war is characterized by destruction in the name of certain glorified causes and brings dehumanizing consequences. The section opens with a map illustrating Korea’s severance after the Korean War (Figure 16). In the map, the Korean Peninsula, as the white area in contrast to the surrounding area, is divided into two parts by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The line making this zone is drawn even thicker than that of the national boundaries. Terms of “NORTH KOREA,” “DMZ,” and “SOUTH KOREA” are printed in bold capital letters. Without a caption or any annotation, the map stands alone following the “Tragedy” section’s title page and may leave an uninformed reader wondering why or how the maps

might be considered “tragic.” While the American reader may be familiar with the historical division between East and West Germany, between North and South Vietnam, the historical and political reasons for Korea’s severance may not appear to be relevant, only something “about (one more) distant land, like (any other) distant land” in Cha’s own words. The United States’ involvement in the Korean War is seldom criticized. Susan Sontag has mentioned the American public’s “unanimous acquiescence to the Korean War” in her influential book On Photography first published in 1977 (18), five years before Dictée’s first publication. She rightly observed that the American public had no access to the photographs that recorded the Korean War’s devastating effect on the nation.

The public did not see such photographs because there was, ideologically, no space for them. No one brought back photographs of daily life in Pyongyang, to show that the enemy had a human face, as Felix Greene and Marc Riboud brought back photographs of Hanoi. [...] The Korean War was understood differently—as part of the just struggle of the Free World against the Soviet Union and China—and, given that characterization, photographs of the cruelty of unlimited American firepower would have been irrelevant. (18)

It is uncertain whether or not Cha had read Sontag, but she was certainly aware of this situation, though her critique is not as straightforward as Sontag’s analysis.⁷⁸ The “Tragedy” section does not elaborate on how the intranational division marked by the DMZ on the map, apparently a direct result of the Korean War, actually has its origin in the conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union’s occupation policies regarding the Korean peninsula following World War II (Buzo 50-70). The place names in the map become key words for the reader to do his/her own historical research in order

⁷⁸ Anne Anlin Cheng has cited Sontag’s ideas on photography in her study of Cha’s use of decontextualized photos, criticizing Sontag’s lack of attention to America’s racialized politics revealed in the photos she analyzed, but she does not mention the relevance of Sontag’s social criticism regarding the Korean War photos to Cha’s work.

to make full sense of the map and such words in the following text: “We are severed in Two by an abstract enemy an invisible enemy under the title of liberators who have conveniently named the severance, Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate” (81). The omission of the background information from the map as well as from the text again reflects what has been missing from the mainstream American media coverage and the general public’s view about Korea. Engaging the reader as active participants in reviewing a national history and inter-national relations, the book not only critiques imperial power but again raises the question of whether this state of obliviousness also represents a kind of complicity in the political manipulation of the “other.”

If Sontag has focused on how mainstream American culture utilizes photography as “a tool of power” (8), Cha’s text deploys photos as a means of critiquing that power on its own terms. The interaction between the Korean map and the following text is worth noting for the tragic import of the war highlighted in it. One page after the map, a daughter, presumably Cha herself who is now a Korean-American and speaks “a foreign tongue” other than Korean, writes to her mother about the sorrow of that long lost “mother-land.” She recounts Korean history since colonization from a highly individual, personal perspective. The lyric moments in her writing, such as the following passage about the partition of North and South Korea, clearly demonstrate a melancholy mood:

*The population standing before North standing
before South for every bird that migrates North
for Spring and South for Winter becomes a
metaphor for the longing of return. Destination.
Homeland. (80 original italics)*

The passage contrasts sharply with the map in terms of both focus and tone: the map provides a cold, matter-of-fact explanation for the cause of ordinary people’s poignant

situation described in the passage; the passage, with its sadness intensified by the bird image, brings into relief the dehumanizing implications of the map which conjures the cruelty of war and its traumatic effects on the life of ordinary people.

Furthermore, *Dictée* counters the epic tradition also by refusing a univocal, linear, one-dimensional way of perceiving and writing history. Not only by writing from multiple perspectives, Cha challenges the traditional way of history writing also by a particular arrangement of images, which even evokes a Benjaminian idea of history. In his theory on history, Walter Benjamin emphasizes not the “flow” or “continuum” of events but how the present can be a “monad,” simultaneously a repetition and a revision of a past, or a moment “blasted out the continuum of history” (261-263). The sixth section of *Dictée*, “Elitere Lyric Poetry,” opens with a copy of the historical photograph of the March First Movement in Korea in 1919 (Figure 17).⁷⁹ The image harkens back to the section of “Clio History,” in which Cha writes of Yu Guan Soon’s significant role in organizing this mass demonstration for independence on March 1, 1919 and her subsequent death. The twentieth century has witnessed a great number of political movements in Korea following this: large-scale demonstrations and protests from students and other people have played a significant role for the construction of a democratic system in South Korea. In fact, Cha has woven narratives about the Korean mass protests for political freedom in 1962 and the Kwang Ju Demonstration in 1980 into the “Melpomene Tragedy” section. The deferred appearance of this photo of the March First Movement calls attention to how the independence movement in 1919 has resonated in subsequent mass movements for democracy, and how later demonstrations always invoke earlier moments. In this sense, the photograph of the March First Movement

⁷⁹ For the source information about this photo, see Wester 178.

precisely shows what Benjamin says about history: “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. [...] Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255). It is also worth noting that the photograph features mostly women, who appear to be actively engaged in the demonstration, a voicing of their longing for national independence, in contrast to the silent women in the other photos in the book.

In the passage on the opposite page, Cha writes, “*Let the one who is / diseuse. Diseuse de bonne aventure. Let her call / forth. Let her break open the spell cast upon time / upon time again and again. With her voice, / penetrate earth’s floor*” (123 original italics). The phrases in this passage, with their determination to foreground the woman’s voice, would recur in the section and reinforce the intention to rewrite history with the images of women throughout the book. The “disease” is “a female artiste who specializes in monologue,” and the French term “Disease de bonne aventure” refers to a (woman) fortune teller. These figures draw attention back again to the women demonstrators in the photo and simultaneously to Cha herself as the author of the book. If the textual part of Dictée shows how language—Japanese, French, as well as English—can become a colonial tool, or a medium for political and cultural suppression, the visual part, interacting with Cha’s poetic writings, points to the possibilities of resisting that suppression. A paragraph in “Melpomene Tragedy” has actually given a perfect self-referential annotation to what Cha is doing in the book:

From another epic another history. From the missing narratives. From the multitude of narratives. Missing. From the chronicles. For another telling for other recitations. (81 italics original)

The use of the visual images in the book greatly contributes to this counter-epic that retrieves what is missing from the traditional “chronicles” for “another telling” with new perspectives.

In his introduction to intermedia art, Higgins reminds us that “intermediality” itself does not necessarily lead to the uniqueness or value of an artwork: “some works will become landmarks [...] while the others will be forgotten” (27). Cha’s visual poetry is unforgettable; with their particular attention to Korean Americans at an intersectional point where questions about nation, history, race, and gender meet, her intermedia forms lead the reader along with her on a journey across national, political and artistic borders, a truly thought-provoking journey.

Figures

Figure 1

Surplus Novel, 1980

Porcelain jar, thread, typewritten text on paper

1.75 x 2.5 inches

Source: "Portfolio of Images." The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982) ed. Constance M. Lewallen. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2001. 101.

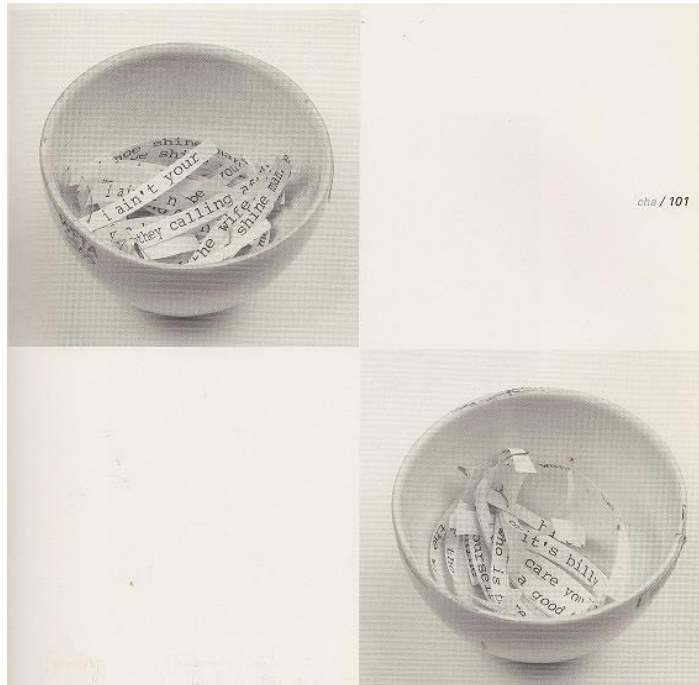


Figure 2

Exilée, 1980

Super-8 film and video installation, 50 minutes, sound

Source: Stephanie Cannizzo's email to the author, November 23, 2009



Figure 3

presence/absence, 1975

Photocopies on paper, hardbound

11.25 x 8.75 inches

Source: Berkeley Art Museum, Cha Archive,

<http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf2g5001r7/>

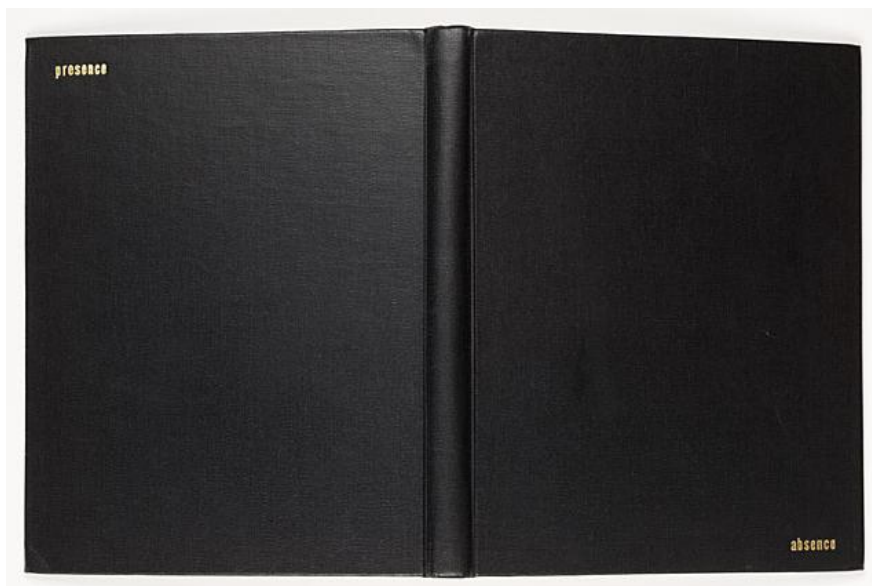


Figure 4

presence/absence, 1975

Photocopies on paper, hardbound, 11.25 x 8.75 inches

Source: Berkeley Art Museum, Cha Archive,

<http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf2g5001r7/>

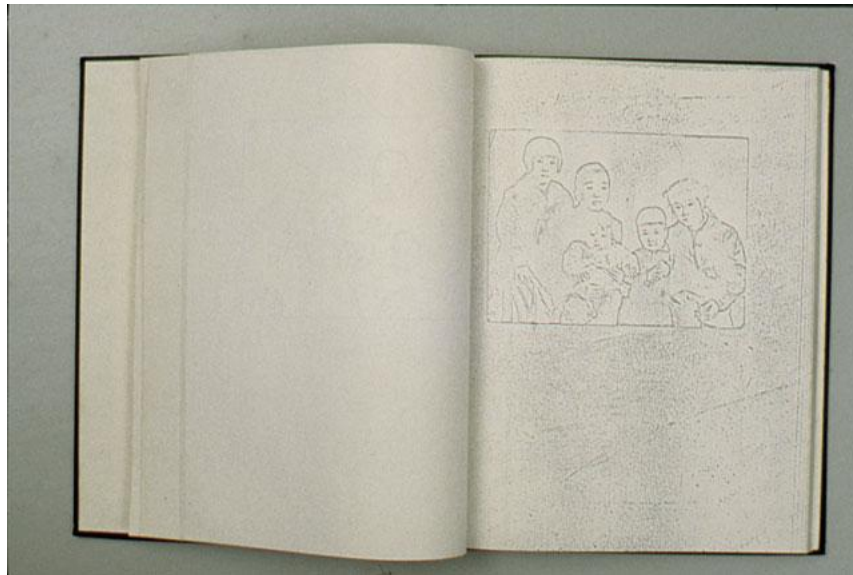


Figure 5

presence/absence, 1975

Photocopies on paper, hardbound, 11.25 x 8.75 inches

Source: Berkeley Art Museum, Cha Archive,

<http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf2g5001r7/>

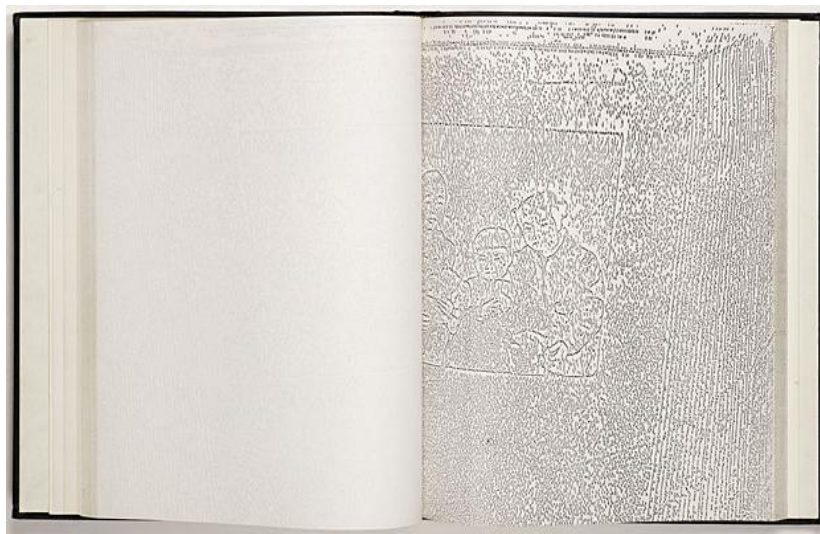


Figure 6

presence/absence, 1975

Photocopies on paper, hardbound, 11.25 x 8.75 inches

Source: Berkeley Art Museum, Cha Archive,

<http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf2g5001r7/>

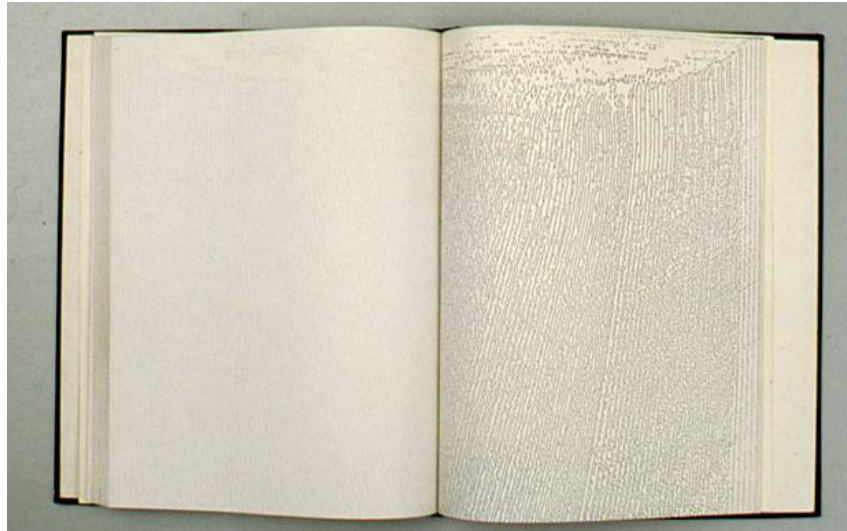


Figure 7

Exilée, 1980

Super-8 film and video installation, 50 minutes, sound

Source: "Portfolio of Images." The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982) ed. Constance M. Lewallen. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2001. 143

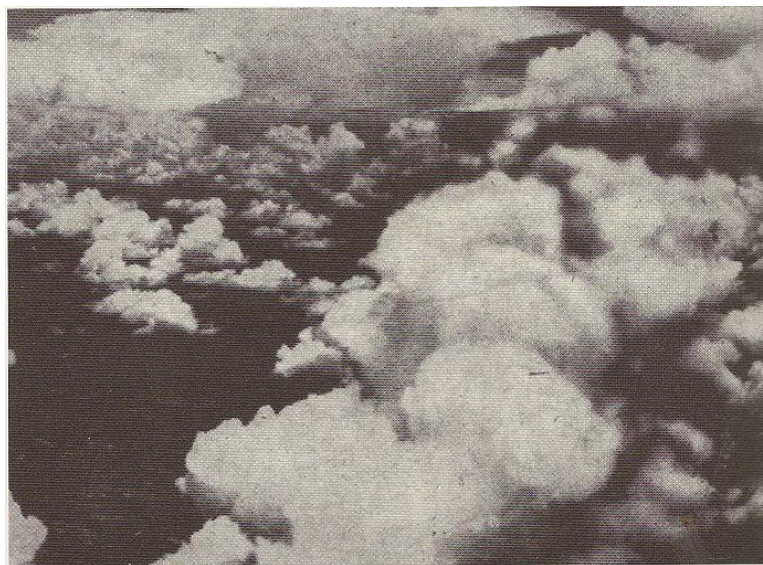


Figure 8

Exilée, 1980

Super-8 film and video installation, 50 minutes, sound

Source: "Portfolio of Images." The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982) ed. Constance M. Lewallen. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2001. 145

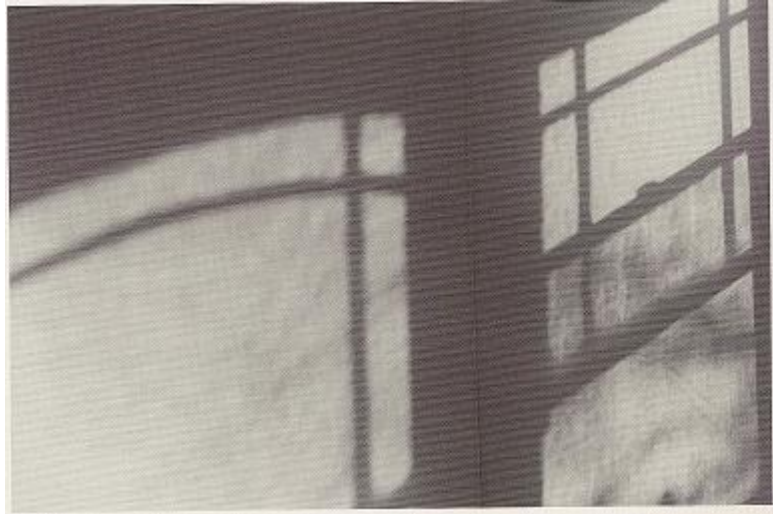


Figure 9

Exilée, 1980

Super-8 film and video installation, 50 minutes, sound

Source: "Portfolio of Images." The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982) ed. Constance M. Lewallen. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2001. 146

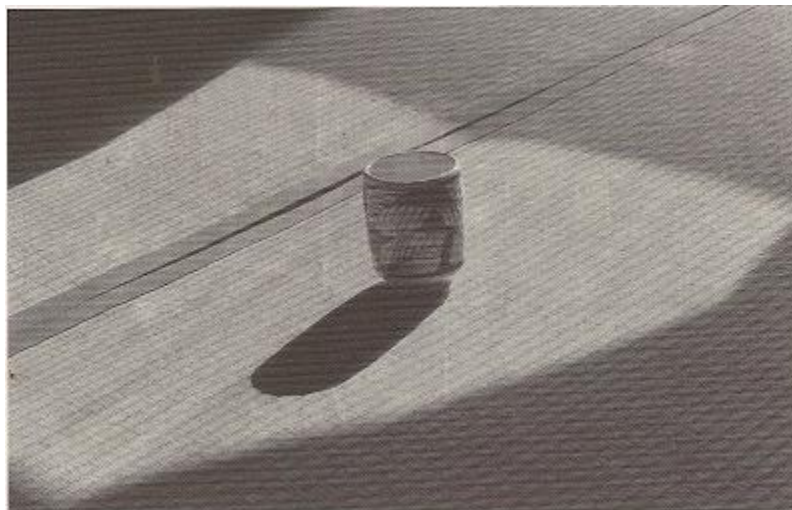


Figure 10

Source: Dictée. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1995. Frontispiece.



Figure 11

Source: Dictée. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1995. 24.



Figure 12

Source: Dictée. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1995. Backcover.



Figure 13

Source: Dictée. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1995. 119.



Figure 14

Source: Dictée. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1995. 44



Figure 15

Source: Dictée. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1995. 59



Figure 16

Source: Dictée. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1995. 78.



Figure 17

Source: Dictée. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1995. 122.



Conclusion
“New Directions” for Asian North American Poetry?

In the 2004 anthology Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation, the editor Victoria Chang notes an emerging formation in Asian American poetry: a “more fluid sense of ethnic boundaries” that is the result of the movement away from more traditional subject matter and form (xx-xxv). In response to Chang, Timothy Yu rightly warns, “if the work of younger poets lacks that context [of Asian American experience], Asian American poetry would appear to have a dim future” (n.pag.). With the examples of such formally innovative poets as Mông-Lan, Linh Dinh, Nick Carbo, and Truong Tran, he insightfully points to new directions for Asian American poetry in work that “reactivates the dialectics of politics and form” and that “allow[s] us to see the way race and culture continue to structure the individual Asian American experience” (n.pag.). The four poets in this study, too, have explored the “dialectics” between formal exploration and social engagement from a transcultural perspective. Their poetry weaves multiple histories and geographies into poetic texts through intertextual practices. This study argues that reading these poets’ transcultural intertextuality demonstrates the necessity of a transcultural perspective in reading Asian North American poetry and provides a way of understanding the transnational and transcultural formation of ethnicity through the lens of poetic analysis. From Ali’s more conventional lyric poems to Cha’s avant-garde intermedia texts, the dissertation delineates a trajectory of formal exploration in Asian North American poetry. It is concerned with the significance of form in Asian American poetics,

particularly how the poetic form calls attention to a poet's way of engaging with literary, historical, and political contexts in which he or she writes.

What specific "new directions" has my study of Ali, Hahn, Wah, and Cha made visible for Asian North American poetry? First, intermedia exploration, especially that involving both writing and visual art, seems to be an especially popular practice among Asian North American poets in the past two decades. As Cha actively explored the possibility of ethnic and exilic writings both with language and in visual media in the 1970s and 1980s, recently there has been increasing exploration in multiple media among Asian North American poets. Wah's recent work, for example, is often characterized by cooperation with visual and performing artists. His chapbook Isadora Blue, published in 2005, contains a series of poems about the hurricane-ravaged waterfront along the north coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, in southeastern Mexico. The panoramic picture of what looks like a severely damaged bridge on the cover becomes the backdrop for the poems. Throughout the book, a recurring figure named "Mr. In-Between" meditates on the natural disaster confronting his eyes, with the broken door as a central image, and also on his own position "in the doorway" between languages, nations, and cultures (13, 32).⁸⁰ His latest book Sentenced to Light, which includes his poem series "All Americans" that I study in Chapter Three, contains a series of poems that "were produced for collaborative image-text projects" (158). Echoing his early image-text books, Tree and Pictograms the Interior of BC, these new books further reveal how the interplay of image and poetic text makes an effective site for exploring the intersectionality of ethnicity.

⁸⁰ Originally Wah intended to include a series of photos of the "smashed and broken door" in the book but could not do it due to some editorial problems.

It is worth noting, too, that most of the formally innovative younger poets Yu mentions have also collaborated with visual artists or practice art themselves. Truong Tran, whose work has won several important prizes, has done both. One of his early projects, The Book of Perceptions, exhibited in 1998 and published as a book in 1999, features his poems and Chung Hoang Chuong's photography. A record of their different yet related responses to their work in Vietnamese American communities as well as their travel in Vietnam, the exhibition and the book under the same title are intended to "capture the differences in [their] artistic experiences" and to "address the complexities of the immigrant identity, that of those at the crossing of two cultures."⁸¹ In one of the photos in the project, what looks like street-vendors' bicycles are parked at the door of a "SONY" store or factory. Three people squatting near the bicycles seem to be engaged in shopping. Interestingly, the photo visualizes a contrast between transnational corporate economy, represented by the "SONY" logo, and traditional local life, represented by the street shopping scene, in contemporary Vietnam. Tran's poem juxtaposed with the photo contains these lines: "there at the crossing [between "perceptions" and "the perceived"] are the / casualties fragments to stories / some still struggling to find the / beginnings."⁸² The interplay of the text and the image draws attention to the local "stories" that may easily get obscured in the global economy. Although it is a response to an image of contemporary Vietnam, the piece recalls the way in which Cha—in another context altogether—intends to recover the "missing narratives" and to attempt "another telling for other recitations." (Dictée 81). Like Cha, Tran has begun his own career in visual art as

⁸¹ Taken from their own words about the project. See the introductions to the exhibition at http://www.creativeworkfund.org/modern/bios/truong_tran.html, and also at http://www.asianartnow.com/bop_main.html.

⁸² From the website for the exhibition, http://www.asianartnow.com/bop_main.html.

well. In 2010, he had his first solo exhibition of artworks in San Francisco, making one wonder whether and how his visual art is informed by or will inform his poetic writings.

Linh Dinh is another example. Born in Vietnam and coming to the United States after the Vietnam War, Dinh is well-known for his formally diverse poetry that is often centered around such themes as violence on the body, trauma of war, and cultural identity. His poetic language is highly visual, often marked with a disturbing literalism and dark humor. Interestingly, critics have seldom attended to his enthusiasm for photography. His photos, self-published in his photo blog, State of the Union, which according to him intends to record the changing American city in the recent economic turmoil: “With [the United States’] industries mostly gone, unemployment constantly rising, millions of homes foreclosed and businesses shut down, it should become clear that the country is going through an economic convulsion that will forever change its character. What will emerge from this, I cannot conjecture, but I want to track it at street level, close to the ground, where the bodies are.”⁸³ His photos—with their characteristic literalism—evince a deep concern for the urban lives of the under-classes, a concern not limited by ethnic boundaries. The persistent focus on human bodies, often those obviously in suffering, in his photography, has provided a mirror for or an extension of the themes explored in his poetry. If Cha’s intermedia experimentation often interweaves writing with visual material within the framework of a particular text, Dinh’s exploration in two media seems to be developed in parallel, without apparent interaction. However, it is necessary to read his photography, which visualizes the social and economic contexts in which he is situated, in order to better understand his poetry’s persistent attention to visual detail and

⁸³ These words appear on the Brazilian art website <http://www.sibila.com.br/index.php/arterisco/899-state-of-the-union-by-linh-dinh>, where his photo blog was featured.

concern with the violence inflicted upon ethnically and economically underrepresented communities. If apparently “silent” works of visual art, as Derrida has claimed in an interview, can always be read and interpreted as “potential discourse” and are “in fact already talkative, full of virtual discourses” (12-13), Asian North American poets’ exploration in visual art becomes a significant part of their “discourse,” which forces us to continuously think about the limits and possibilities of poetic language and forms in dealing with the past and present of Asian North American experience.

Pointing to this new trend of simultaneous exploration in poetry and visual art, my study has remained focused on the major ethnic groups of Asian North Americans. In studying the inextricable social and aesthetic dynamics of Asian North American poetry, however, one has to note that this poetry has become increasingly diverse with the work of poets from formerly underrepresented ethnic groups. Another “new direction” of Asian North American poetry, then, lies in these poets’ work that may shed new light upon the history of relations between North American and Asian countries and how that history affects the existence of Asian North Americans today. A group that has gained increased attention is that of Vietnamese American poets. Poets including Barbara Tran, Mông-Lan, as well as Tran and Dinh have clearly demonstrated a rise in Vietnamese American literature in the last two decades. These poets’ work is not merely centered on the Vietnam War, which as Barbara Tran observes has dominated the public imagination of the Vietnam in the United States (481). Their wide range of writings, concerned with both the pre-and post-war Vietnam and the Vietnamese American psyche, reveal efforts to bring the modern histories of Vietnam and the United States into proper perspective

and to position the Vietnamese American experience in relation to the intertwined histories.

Besides, the increasing appearance of Filipino American poets such as Nick Carbó and Laotian American poets such as Bryan Thao Worra has attracted critical attention too. What Victoria Chang does not take into account about this younger generation is that instead of moving from the older Asian American literary traditions, these younger poets have actually shown a strong commitment to cultural and political activism. Their work that links aesthetic exploration to community building often recalls what earlier Asian American authors of the 1960s and 1970s strove for, although in new forms and with new approaches to the question of ethnicity. Tran, for example, has been actively involved in providing education and other forms of aid for new immigrants and refugee communities in California. Based in Minnesota, Worra has been an active member of local literary and cultural activities and an important promoter of the work of Laotian and Hmong writers. The important question to consider regarding this younger generation of Asian North American poets, I believe, is not only how their experimentation with language and form is closely linked to their engagement with the social and cultural dynamics of the United States or Canada, but how they continuously define and redefine “ethnicity” and “ethnic writing,” thematically and formally, in relation to the past and present of complicated international and intercultural relations.

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