

**Asian American Elegy:
Ethnicity, Family, and Language in
the Poetry of Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee**

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Abstract

Researchers of Asian American poetry tend to analyse poetic works from the perspective of either identity, form, or philosophy, among which identity is the most discussed theme and dimension. However, research which has documented and explored all of the three categories is scant. Therefore, this thesis aims to explore two of the prominent poets, Marilyn Mei-Ling Chin and Li-Young Lee, in Asian American literature and their books of poems on the basis of Jahan Ramazani's theorization of modern elegy and poetic mourning. The main frame of argument is to deal with the issue of loss concerning themes of ethnic identity, family, and language. During the process of investigation of the three themes, the study also attempts to look into poems in terms of not only ethnic identity but also formal elements such as metaphors or prosody, as well as the metaphysical conception of Levinas's ethics of the Other. All three levels, i.e. ethnic identity, formal elements, and metaphysical conception, discussed and combined in one thesis are the main methodology and what makes the thesis special. The chapter of introduction covers accomplished facts about Asian American poetics, the development of elegy, and an overview of each chapter of my thesis. Chapter one probes into Chin's activist consciousness in many of her poems and finds out how she leaves her mourning for cultural identity unaccomplished. The second chapter traces Lee's notion of universe mind and his reconstruction of the father figure as well as family stories, which lead to the unresolved lost loved otherness. Chapter three examines how both poets form their hybrid linguistic identity by means of creative mourning and metaphoric density. The last chapter concludes with overall thoughts on Asian American modern elegy by emphasising the importance of reading Asian American poetry as cultural elegy, which provides a better understanding of mourning for loss and more interpretative possibilities embedded in Asian American poetry.

Table of Contents

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
DECLARATION	8
INTRODUCTION	9
CHAPTER 1	
“She Walks into Exile Vowing No Return”: Distanced Assimilation in Marilyn Chin’s Poetry	72
CHAPTER 2	
“Your otherness is perfect as my death”: Li-Young Lee’s Elegiac Vision and Family Narratives of Displacement	146
CHAPTER 3	
“Some Things Never Leave a Person”: Trans/Re-configuring Chin and Lee’s Linguistic Hybridity	248
CONCLUSION	308
EPILOGUE	314
REFERENCES	322

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Someone had once said that thesis writing is an act that turns a restless person into somebody who develops spinal problems such as slipped disc, numb limbs, and inflammation. Both my aggravated neck and spinal problems along with some other somatic ailments, among which the vestibular neuritis is the most serious, put me through some tormenting hardships during the process of thesis writing. One can hardly realise how distressing and uncomfortable it feels without getting vestibular neuritis. Attacks of giddiness

and nausea occur 24 hours a day, lasting for years. It's like you have carsickness and seasickness all the time; you feel feeble, but you can do nothing. Thyroiditis has also stricken me in recent years. Those physical sufferings are decidedly a siren call for my thought on and attention to the relationship between a man's achievements and health. I lost some, I gained some, so I treasure every single bit of what I possess at the moment. I benefited a great deal from both the issue of loss in my research and my own experiences. This subject matter will never vanish from this secular world as human beings will always have to learn how to deal with loss in their worldly and temporal existence. I am grateful that I have had this opportunity to write up this thesis in the middle of my life.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

“The art of losing isn’t hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.
[...]

Then practice losing farther, losing faster.”
—“One Art,” by Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979)

This thesis investigates the poetry of Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee, concentrating on the recurrent themes of ethnicity, family, and language. Focusing on two of the most important contemporary Asian American poets, it seeks to explore the ways cultural identity is represented in writers of the Asian American diasporas. These three thematic concerns, I argue, are things the two poets have in common, though they also represent the three motifs with very distinct points of view. I also suggest that all three issues—ethnicity, family, and language—are intimately interrelated when we probe into the poetic works of such diasporic poets as Chin and Lee. One of Lee’s lines in “Immigrant Blues” invokes “Psychological Paradigms of Displaced Persons” (*Behind My Eyes* 28). The psychology of displacement underpins the thematic framework throughout this study of two poets of the Asian American diasporas.

The Rise of Asian American Literature

Over the past half century, there has been a tremendous wave of interest in Asian American literature. As I employ the term, Asian American literature refers to writings in English by Asian American writers, who are partially or wholly of Asian descendants currently inhabiting the United States of America and whose literary productions have been published. Researchers of Asian American literature, however, used to focus more on book-length prose and fiction than on poetry. As a matter of fact, Asian American poetry also constitutes a considerably substantial field marked by a wealth of materials as well as plentiful topics within American literature.

Inspired by the social tumult and activist unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including Civil Rights Movement and antiwar sentiment, Asian American writers generated representations of and responses to their own minority situation within the U.S.A., which is undeniably and centrally involved with cultural politics. The specific cultural politics in question are shaped by how the emergence of minority literature came about in American literature, what this phenomenon means, and how contemporary poets represent the phenomenon. The issue reminds us, for instance, of

discriminative laws laid down against Chinese people as one of the retaliatory measures, the most significant of which was the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the one and only law specifically targeted at people of a particular ethnicity in American history. While recent scholarly research regarding the exclusion of the Chinese in American society has been focused on historical, social, legal, and political perspectives, literary and artistic representations have also played a vital role in the construction of the cultural identity of Chinese Americans—and our understanding of the history.

Literary efforts were thus undertaken not merely to define and shape up Asian American cultural identity but also to build up a solid foundation for Asian American literature. As part of ethnic American literature, Asian American literature received little attention before the 1960s, when the Civil Rights Movement spread out like a raging fire. In 1972, the first anthology focusing on Asian American writers was published under the title of *Asian-American Authors*, edited by Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas.

Afterwards, Asian American literature also started to occupy a space in traditionally authoritative American literary canons. It featured in both the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), edited by Emory Elliot, and *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990), edited by

Paul Lauter. Later, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1994)

also included individual Asian American writers and their works, among whom was Li-Young Lee, given a prominent place by the editor Nina Baym.

More waves of anthologies and treatises that are of literary and historical significance came in the 1980s would help to display more of the actual latitude of Asian American poetry, including Elaine H. Kim's *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982), King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi's *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (1988), Shirley Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly's *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (1989), and so on. Other anthologies and monographs of the 1990s would also help to reveal the range of contemporary Asian American poetry and the diversity of ideas that contribute to canon formation. There are: Ling-chi Wang and Henry Yiheng Zhao's *Chinese American Poetry: An Anthology* (1991), "the first anthology of English-language works by American poets of Chinese ancestry document[ing] the continuity as well as the far-reaching changes in the Chinese poetic tradition, even as it emphasizes the Chinese American contribution to contemporary American poetry," as the University of Washington Press recommended, *Dissident Song: A Contemporary Asian*

American Anthology (1991), edited by Marilyn Chin, David Wong Louie, and Ken Weisner, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993), written by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (1993), edited by Garrett Hongo, *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology* (1996), edited by Shawn Hsu Wong, and so forth. These books not only reconfigure geographic, ethnic, and cultural politics of Asian America but also reconsider the term Asian American in the light of literary production in English. A poet and an editor of an anthology at the same time, Marilyn Chin appears to stand on the crest of the epochal billow and act as a pioneering bard of Asian American dissident songs. It is the socio-historical agitated atmosphere and the expanding capacity of American society in those two decades that brought up Asian American poets such as Lee and Chin and helped literary coalitional discourses and cultural nationalism, which used to highlight the “shared experience[s] of subjugation” among people of colour and was used to “unlock the [...] key to memory and to provide a base for unity,” gradually come into being (Leong 166). Among the advocates of Asian American literary coalition Fran Chin is the most aggressive.

The Politics of Identity and Authenticity

Questions of identity have always been a central concern to Asian/Chinese American writers as part of an ethnic minority in the USA. Chinese American literary study would probably not have fallen into place and become a substantial American academic discipline without the editors of *Aiiieeeee!*: *An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), an Asian American literary project launched by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong. One of their major preoccupations was to forge an “Asian American sensibility” as well as an Asian American language that is distinct from those of Euro-Americans and Asians. They claimed to represent “fifty years of our whole voice” (Chin et al. vii), which displays their resolve to set up a model for Asian American literary tradition and coalition.

In confronting American mainstream society and culture, early Asian American writers chose either to resist or to assimilate. These two types of Asian American writers could be categorised within either a resistance model or an assimilation model, based on their relationships to the American mainstream society. Their modes of thinking and action were the results of how they positioned themselves in the face of the dominant culture of white

America, the established literary canon and public opinion. Frank Chin, however, was an activist who in his contribution to *Aiiieeeee!* insisted on a distinctive Asian American sensibility—one that was “neither Asian nor white American” (Chin et al. xxi). In addition, he stated that “our anthology is exclusively Asian-American. That means Filipino-, Chinese-, and Japanese-Americans, American born and raised” (Chin et al. vii). The need for an explanation suggests Chin and his contemporaries coined the umbrella term “Asian-American” out of frustration felt by many American-born citizens of Asian racial and cultural inheritance at being treated as outsiders despite the fact that in many cases their ancestral settlement could be traced back as long as seven generations (Chin et al. vii). Racial discrimination and even Orientalist prejudice gave rise to a new brand of cultural nationalism, in which “American nativity,” i.e. being “American born and raised” as advocated by Frank Chin, became a prerequisite for Asian American identity.

Not only “American nativity” but also “authenticity” has become a crucial and critical tool for Frank Chin to inveigh against what common people view as representative Chinese American writers, such as Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and David Henry Hwang. In “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” a ninety-two-page essay included

in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991), an explicit sequel to *Aiiieeeee!*, Frank Chin

ferociously debunked the aforementioned writers as

the first writers of any race, and certainly the first writers of Asian ancestry, to so boldly fake the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history. And, to legitimize their faking, they have to fake all of Asian American history and literature, and argue that the immigrants who settled and established Chinese America lost touch with Chinese culture, and that a faulty memory combined with new experience produced new versions of these traditional stories. This version of history is their contribution to the stereotype. [...] Their elaboration of this version of history, in both autobiography and autobiographical fiction, is simply a device for destroying history and literature. (Chin 1991: 3)

Chin apparently aimed an intense reproach at those writers for the way they have intentionally appropriated literary works and faked history to cater to the imaginations and stereotypes that white Americans have toward people of Chinese lineage. As a dramatist, fiction writer, editor, and literary critic, Chin attempted to demarcate Asian/Chinese American literature from other kinds but in doing so he landed himself in a troubled and troubling debate about the difference between “the real” and “the fake.”

He claimed that Chinese society was portrayed in the works of these writers as a misogynist culture, thereby exacerbating the stereotypes long imposed upon Chinese males. The racial and discriminatory stereotypes that

Chinese males had long been subjected to include, but were not limited to, a tyrant dying for power, an impotent heathen, a ludicrous and loyal servant, or a long-haired, slant-eyed man in a Ching dynasty outfit who eats rats and dogs. Those demeaning cartoon-style images were regularly displayed in caricatures, cartoons, and journalistic propaganda in Anglo-American popular culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Fu Manchu was a typical Chinese villain in Anglo-American literature of the period, whose wicked appearance included small and slanted eyes, down-turned moustache, and mandarin costume.¹ On the other hand, the model of a typical Chinese good guy was Charlie Chan, a police inspector who spoke pidgin English with “pseudo-Confucian aphorisms” and whose exterior and interior were incongruous: “his face is a placid mask; he stands like a statue, seemingly somnolent, with his beady eyes half-closed” while “beneath his bovine exterior resides a shrewdness, attention to detail and ‘Oriental’ patience that, together

¹ The fictional role of Mandarin in the popular sci-fi movie *Iron Man 3* is an illustration of white America’s stereotypical fantasy of evil Chinese people. Even though it is now the twenty-first century, the image of a hideous exotic scoundrel in a movie is still based on Fu Manchu and interestingly, the appearance of this imaginary character then and now is not so different. Furthermore, when a villainous character is needed in a fiction or movie, any other race than Euro-American tends to be the first choice. The villains tend to have repugnant looks to reflect their monstrous intentions and partly because the prototype of a devilish role in sci-fi movies is the monster from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), the first work of science fiction. Whether it is Fu Manchu or Mandarin, it is a transformation of Frankenstein’s monster, representing white superiority that degrades and uglifies the specific ethnic people who have been referred to. Shelley’s creation of the monster was to display how formidable and repulsive the human heart can be, but when the model is transformed into a figure representing a certain ethnic group, it reveals the currency of a distorted stereotype of both the mental and physical aspects of the designated ethnic people in Anglo-American culture and tradition.

with his perhaps racial ‘sixth sense,’ enable him to solve the most complicated murder mysteries” (Kim 18). Even though the image of a “good” Chinese man in Anglo-American literature has been created to redress previous public misconceptions, the incongruity between the stereotype and the new image inevitably confirmed a sense of comic grotesqueness and exoticism. As a result, according to Elaine Kim, new images of the “Good” Asian at best transformed the sinister and wicked Chinese into “a non-threatening, non-competitive, asexual ally of the white man, usually contrasted with a parade of Asians in secondary roles as cowardly servants and vicious gangsters” (ibid.). Whether the icon in the shape of a Chinese person is good or bad, the images of Chinese people created in early Anglo-American social, historical, and literary materials emphasised the irreconcilable discrepancies between Caucasian Americans and Chinese, and accentuates a sense of the white superiority in terms of body, intellect, ethics, education, and religion.

Frank Chin has referred to himself as the Chinatown Cowboy in order to distinguish Asian/Chinese Americans from both Asians and Chinese and to emphasise how Chinese Americans, who have inhabited the American West just as White American cowboys do, have become an indispensable part of American history and culture. In the meantime, the toughness, gallantry,

and masculinity of cowboys were what Chin endeavoured to contrast with the weakness and undersize of Chinese men who always had long plaited hair and were always dressed in a long mandarin robe or gown, which made them look effeminate in Americans' eyes. Owing to various racist treatments and discriminatory acts aimed at the Chinese in America, Frank Chin viewed the history of Chinese in America as a process of eliminating Chinese American masculinity on a large scale. In other words, it represented a kind of cultural castration, not only in respect of massive expulsions directed against Chinese people but also in the sense of male writers being silenced in literary and publishing circles. Chin condemned female writers like Wong, Tan, and Kingston, who profited by means of feminism and provided American society with exotic Chinese cultural models of queerness and stereotypical images of a model minority.

The complicated politics of authenticity within Chinese American literature, history, myth, and cultural heritage lead us to Frank Chin's initial simple idea: As long as he can analyse the Chinese elements in those Chinese American writers' work and compare their appropriations with original work in Chinese, he can identify and expose the inconsistency between them. By doing so, he intended to prove that inappropriate appropriations were

misleading and may aggravate the stereotype imposed on Chinese Americans.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) was inspired by the widely known story of Fa Mulan. She acquired the power of imagination through her mother's narration and recital of the story and went on to reflect on her own cultural identity, the ambivalence of mother-daughter relationship, and the various trials and challenges of growing up. In other words, Kingston intermingled her own personal experiences, the Chinese literary classic *The Ballad of Mulan*, as well as imagination to write the "memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts."² Nevertheless, to prove that Kingston tampered with the story of Mulan, Frank Chin juxtaposed the original Chinese text of *The Ballad of Mulan* with his own English translation of it. He stated, "Here, we offer the best proof, the corroborative fact of the ballad itself, in Chinese, and in English translation" (Chin 1991: 4). By means of his sedulous juxtaposition, he wished to establish the authenticity and authority of his statements.

Chin's technique seemed generally convincing. However, some of his misinterpretations and faulty renderings pruned away the authenticity and authority that he had been firmly alleging and defending. His understanding

² This is the subtitle of *The Woman Warrior*.

of this ancient Chinese ballad is clearly debatable. In pursuit of the authority and authenticity of his own interpretation, Frank Chin appealed to the source text, interpreted it in his unique way, and criticised other writers' interpretations as erroneous on these grounds. He relied on his bilingual privilege and put the labels of distortion and betrayal on Kingston's works, presuming that her unfaithful appropriations were designed to pander to white American society's liking for exotic and bizarre narratives about Asians/Chinese, but he might be over-confident and unable to detect the slips or distortions in his own translation, which sharply reduced the force of his own claim to "authenticity."

His call to distinguish the real from the fake was simply a makeshift strategy. Besides, his decision to write an essay of ninety-two pages may be construed as a symptom of his extreme anxiety about the disparagement of Asian/Chinese American literature. Actually, by contrast, the literary intertextuality between Chinese and English reflected in Kingston's works definitely has a positive meaning. Her writings contain intentional, skilful transformations, strategic maneuvers, and what we might call creative treason, which go far beyond the naïve account of distortion and betrayal Chin accuses her of.

Another strategy of Frank Chin's was to turn to the heroic characters in Chinese literary classics to build up a Chinese American heroic tradition and reverse the image of Asian American men from emasculation to heroic virility. As a resistant strategy, his approach helped bring the Asian/Chinese American literary heroic tradition into efficacy. Chin's ambition was to establish the heroic tradition of Asian/Chinese American literature founded on ancient Chinese literature and counteract both the Chinese American feminism represented by Kingston as well as Anglo-American male racist discourses. Yet, during the process, he fell into a trap of reductionist and over-idealized interpretations. Any national and ethnic literature is multifarious and diversified, so when a certain type of literature is propagated, other types of literatures might be constrained, depreciated, or repelled inadvertently. For Chinese American writers, Chin's achievements in terms of heroized Chinese American literature were significant, but Kingston too has made major contributions to the feminist Chinese American literary canon. Both Chin's prototype of "Chinatown cowboy," ingeniously moulding the image of tough Chinese American men in the American West, as well as Kingston's brilliant feat of creating her "Woman Warrior," condensing the cultural identity of Chinese American women who withstand racism and sexism, are clear-cut

images and real-life heroes/heroines that vacillate between two cultural hegemonies, attempting to open up their space.

Chin's essentialist insistence on the opposition between the real and the fake in representations of Chinese American experience has naturally invited agreement and critique from other writers and critics. Nonetheless, realism is not always the one and only perspective to bring to bear on and valorise artistic or literary creations. Whether the recomposition remains unswervingly faithful to the original Chinese sources and experiences does not affect the value and importance of an artwork or a literary work.

Controversial as the issue would be, however, Frank Chin did provoke people then and now to reflect deeply on the complex issues involving in narrative representations by and about figures inhabiting two or more ethnic cultures.

Chin and his co-editors of *The Aiiieeeee!* demonstrated how influential an anthology can be when it dealt with the history and culture of certain ethnic groups, consolidated cultural nationalism, and exerted an influence on shaping Asian American writing and cultural nationalism since 1974.

To establish the unique space and tradition of Asian American literature, history, and culture, Frank Chin insisted on claiming an Asian American identity and sensibility, reacted polemically against white racism, wrecked the

current ethnic stereotypes, proposed a combative attitude, and raised the flag of Asian American creative language and culture. He meant to redress the stereotype caused by history and advocated his notion of Asian American literature, which is evenly matched with both Asian and American dominant societies, by means of historic declaration and radical speeches. In spite of the fact that these two prominent figures—Chin and Kingston—had incompatible views about what constitutes Asian American literature, they shared similarities. Both of them responded to the dominant American society, culture, and history in their own way, attempting to create a distinctive Asian/Chinese American tradition to displace American Orientalist discourse. This sort of intra-ethnic, intra-cultural dispute happens to disprove any notion of ethnic homogeneity or cultural unity in the eyes of observers and commentators. As a matter of fact, there are always intricate relationships and powers inside any of the ethnic community.

Heterogeneity of Asian American Poets and Poetry

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act brought many more immigrants from Asia and created more opportunities for them. In addition to Chinese,

Japanese, Korean, and Filipino people, other Asian people including Indonesians, Vietnamese, Thais, and Pakistanis were coming to the U.S. for their American dreams. As a result, the term “Asian American” began to embrace more possibilities and it now refers to both American-born Asians and Asian immigrants alike. In other words, “American nativity” is not the only crucial condition to define the Asian American as Frank Chin and others argue in terms of cultural nationalism. By contrast, “cultural nationalism,” as King-Kok Cheung observes, “has taken plural forms” (1997: 3). Critics such as Shirley Lim (1997) and Lisa Lowe (1996) have also challenged the idea of a unifying Asian American sensibility, foregrounding instead the concepts of diaspora and heterogeneity, which powerfully respond to the dispute over authenticity that Frank Chin raises, reveal the intra-ethnic diversity within the country, and wreck the myth of the model minority. According to Lim’s own incisive definition,

Diaspora, [...] denotes a condition of being deprived of the affiliation of nation, not temporarily situated on its way toward another totality, but fragmented, demonstrating provisionality and exigency as immediate, unmediated presences. The discourse of diaspora is that of disarticulation of identity from natal and national resources, and includes the exilic imagination but is not restricted to it. (Lim 1997: 297)

Though both newcomers and the American-born minority might be of the same strain and categorised under some such big umbrella label, say, as Asian Americans, Lim points out that there exist big differences between the two groups and they don't share exactly the same interests. The fragmentation, provisionality, and disarticulation of diasporic identity thus has the potential to cause internal conflict within certain minority communities.

Claiming America is one strategic way of assimilation whereas remaining culturally distinct is also an efficient way of surviving as it involves resistance and keeping a stance/distance towards the dominant culture. No matter whether it is assimilation mode or resistance mode, this suggests how Asian American immigrants and American-born Asians may posit themselves differently in the face of American mainstream society, how their thinking and actions tend to react, and how a person may vacillate between two cultures or even be torn biculturally. Concerning the phenomenon of biculturalism in the context of Asian/Chinese American literature, there are generally both pros and cons. The most aggressive among the opponents of biculturalism is once again Frank Chin when we look at his activist cultural nationalism in forming Asian/Chinese American literature and community. He severely criticises the Asian/Chinese American identity of being "either...or" and

“neither...nor” in the wake of the notable “fifty years of [Asian American’s]

whole voice”:

We have been encouraged to believe that we have no cultural integrity as Chinese- or Japanese-Americans, that we are either Asian (Chinese or Japanese) or American (white), or are measurably both. This myth of being either/or and the equally goofy concept of the *dual personality* haunted our lobes while our rejection by both Asia and white America proved we were neither one nor the other. Nor were we half and half or more one than the other. (Chin et al. vii-viii)

On the contrary, the “dual personality” is something what Jade Snow Wong

celebrates. In an interview she reveals,

In spite of some difficulties, I am delighted to be endowed with the dual heritage. [...] This is a dual identity, which a person has to remain composed about. Some people hate it, while I don’t. I choose to accept it instead. I was born like this. [...] Therefore, we possess dual perspective and dual inheritance, making our life plentiful. We would like to think that we have edges from both cultures. (70-71; translation mine)

That dual heritage and dual perspective resulting from the dual identity is

regarded by people like Wong as a vantage point to access the advantages and

traditions of both cultures. Aside from the dual identity, George Uba even

categorises poets like Marilyn Chin, David Mura, and John Yao as post-activist

poets, who “hold that identity, whether tribal or otherwise, is always in doubt” (35). He further expounds, “it is not that the issue of identity has ceased to demand their attention;” instead, post-activist poets tend to “recognize problematics of language and event both as a way of approaching identity and of renouncing its stability” (35). He draws “the distinct contours” of Asian American poetry by taking Chin, Mura, and Yau as examples: “For Chin and Mura—although in different ways—conceiving identity is only possible by foregrounding its partialities, while for Yau every version of identity is radically contestable because of the unstable nature of the tools used to conceptualize it” (Uba 35-36).

Since “every version of identity is radically contestable” (Uba 36) and diverse, how could a literary critic skip this essential element that could have contributed to poetry without talking about the poet’s identity (e.g. Asian American identity)? On the other hand, since Asian American poetry is also beautifully wrought and delicately devised, how could a critic ignore the “form” that used to be discussed only in the work of “racially-unmarked” poets (Dorothy Wang xxiii) without paying heed to the details of its aesthetic configurations (such as form, tone, rhetoric, or figurative device)? Therefore, in *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary*

Asian American Poetry, Dorothy J. Wang lends greater complexity to the notion of Asian American poetics by laying equal emphases on two iconic poets' ethnic identity and properties and forms of poetry:

How likely would a critic be to approach Li-Young Lee's poems by studying his use of anaphora? How likely would a critic be to examine Louise Glück's poems by turning to her autobiographical background—for example, her having growing up Jewish on Long Island—in the same way that critics often invoke the “Chinese” background of Marilyn Chin when speaking of her poems? (xxi)

In fact, earlier in 2009, Timothy Yu's *Race and the Avant-Garde:*

Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965, an “avant-garde” and advanced study on the Avant-Garde and Asian American poetry, has given a similar conception to Wang's. He points out:

In the 1970s American poetic avant-gardes underwent a process of ethnicization, in which aesthetic innovation were seen as a means of articulating the distinctive social position of an artistic group. This was as true for a group such as Language writing, which consisted largely of white male writers, as it was for a group such as Asian American poets. [...] Asian American writing—led by the MFA-trained writers who came to prominence in the 1980s—came to be seen as a purely social category, grounded solely in the poetry's “ethnic” content. The work of writers like John Yau, widely seen as a new synthesis of the experimental and the ethnic, is in fact a reminder of the avant-garde origins of experimental and ethnic writing, in which both modes shared a sense of the link between the

aesthetic and the social. (161)

To put it differently, the ethnic identity of an Asian American poet and the ethnic content of his/her poetic work are essential factors when it comes to versification. In examining those Asian American writers, King-Kok Cheung describes them as ones who “refuse to be defined or confined by either” culture as they write into and out of and draw from the two cultural heritages (Cheung 1993: 170). With the fast flow of economic and cultural capital globally, as a matter of fact, this dual identity as well as its derivative—dual perspective—have been raised to the level of transnational matters, rather than only being a domestic intra-national and interethnic dispute. As Shirley Lim states, “in an international perspective, paradigms of diaspora will tend to overlap, destabilize, or supersede paradigms of immigration” (1997: 291). Indeed, except for native Americans, all Americans are descendants of immigrants and belong to members of diasporas. Nevertheless, the history of Asian American immigrants illustrates their notable divergences from immigrant groups coming from Northern and Western Europe. The points of divergence stem from laws that discriminate against Asians in American history and those discriminatory occurrences have been a major theme that Asian American writers have grappled with.

My approach in this thesis connects various perspectives. I take a similar position to King-Kok Cheung, who argues that

one must not overlook the interdependence of politics and literature. Without the initial naming, subsequent institutionalizing, and continuous contestation over this literature, the many voices that are now being heard might have remained mute. Perhaps the most important reason to maintain the designation of ‘Asian American’ literature is not the presence of any cultural, thematic, or poetic unity but the continuing need to amplify marginalized voices, however dissimilar. (1997: 5)

This is also why the designation of “Asian American” is a part of my thesis title, though I know it is controversial and involves much ambiguity, plurality, and heterogeneity. But it is because of its ambiguity, plurality, and heterogeneity that I find it worth exploring. In this regard, I consider Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s critique of the cultural nationalism and political consortium of Asian American to be equally persuasive:

In urging the formation of a strategic essentialist Asian American cultural nationalism unified under U.S. history, many Asian American critics ironically repeat the call of U.S. nationalists for a shared unified American identity in response to the threat of fragmentation posed by minority interest groups. Thus, even as the oppositional concept of ‘minority discourses’—covering feminist, ethnic, and gay literature—has begun to receive institutional support, the category of diaspora writing generally has been ignored. (1997:

291)

Because of ideological and political factors, literary works of diasporas used to be excluded from American literary canons. Writers in diaspora can be regarded as being in a third space where they have no clear-cut national profile and their mediated identity is a special hallmark. They are migrant and exilic and their works are full of nomadic sentiment and metaphors.

The basic idea of diaspora refers back to the Jewish Diaspora but can also be traced back to its earliest meaning in Greek, “*diaspeirein* is Greek for ‘scattering’ (*speir*) and was originally employed to explain the botanical phenomenon of seed dispersal” (Mishra 2002: 13). As a result, the “scattering” or “dispersal” of seeds is a vivid symbol of how diaspora is presented. With the dispersal of various peoples all over the world, the formation of the resident population in all the countries and communities on the planet is bound to be complicated and hybrid. Lisa Lowe reminds us that we should pay attention to the differences among Asian American communities because their “uneven development, nonequivalence, and cultural heterogeneities” (1991: 41) could cause shifting and unstable identities. Indeed, the different historical experiences and characteristics of heterogeneous Asian immigrant groups would destabilise any Asian American

identity that is constructed on a solid monolithic notion of American identity.

Until the 1980s, Asian American literary criticism focused chiefly on Chinese American and Japanese American writers, but it now also shows the multiple changes of position and perception of American identity. Elaine Kim has noticed that the Asian American population and its literature have gradually diversified over the past few decades, and this diversity is reflected in the new directions and dimensions created by contemporary Asian American literature (1982: 214-79). In her “Foreword” to *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, Kim further indicates that “Asian American literature produced in those years centered Chinese and Japanese American male perspectives and valorized Chinatown and Little Tokyo as source, root, and geographical center of Asian America” (xii), but nowadays “Chinese and Japanese American literary works may no longer predominate” (xiv). Saul-ling Cynthia Wong also points out that “In an increasingly diverse Asian American culture representing many ethnic subgroups, Chinese American literature has lost some of its earlier dominance, and new themes embodying current demographic realities are emerging” (1997: 54). King-Kok Cheung has a similar observation: “the label ‘Asian American’ stretches to accommodate new subgroups, so does Asian American literature, which has

now broadened” (1997: 3).

As a result, Shirley Lim offers the following incisive commentary on the heterogeneity and the “diaspora paradigm” of Asian American literature:

The differences between Asian American literature—past and present—and other American minority literatures can be understood differently in the framework offered by the diaspora paradigm. In contrast to reductive notions of the immigrant as someone without history prior to entry into the Western state, recent critical theories recognize the historical discontinuities and the psychological violence visited on individuals through the tragic course of wars, famine, and economic dislocations, and the resulting contradictory constructions of social identity that disallow any racial or national essentializing of the subject. (1997: 296)

The “psychological violence” due to wars, dislocations, or the painful experiences of being in between worlds and languages impinges upon Asians in America such as the poets Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee, who came to the country as immigrant children. Their sense of losing their self, their first language, and cultural heritage entails a profound sense of loss, and lends a powerfully elegiac dimension to their work.

The sense of loss involves not only ethnic identity but also parent-child relationship. A multitude of Asian American poets, male poets in particular, reveal their sentiments towards the usually lofty father figure.

Some of the exemplary poems are inclusive of Eric Chock's "Poem for My Father," Stephen Liu's "My Father's Martial Art," Timothy Liu's "Men Without," Garrett Hongo's "Winnings," Wing Tek Lum's "I Caught Him Once," and Li-Young Lee's "The Gift." These male poets play a vital role in Asian American literary history marked by cultural legacy of typical patriarchy. Their sketches and constructions of the father figure not only embody in a unique manner the masculinity and heroic tradition that Frank Chin proposed but also demonstrate a poetics of fusion, which is especially represented in "The Cleaving" by Li-Young Lee, simultaneously dividing and binding father and son, past and present, Asia and the United States, self and other. The cleaving enhances the father-son tension and mourning for loss of cultural and familial heritage that in no way can be restored and resolved. These poems thematically explore father-son relationship from distinctive perspectives and essentially break demeaning stereotypes and discriminatory practices directed toward men of Asian ancestry. Consequently, they pose a powerful refutation to the Frank Chin's concern: "the failure of Asian-American manhood to express itself in its simplest form: fathers and sons" (Chin et al. xlv). These male poets successfully display Asian American coming-of-age of manhood and modern elegists' representation of loss.

In addition, the sense of loss is intimately bound up with Asian American poets in terms of linguistic alienation. Although “poetry was considered an important vehicle for expressing the politicization of race” (Chang 1996: 81), the tension arises and is further complicated by both the English language and their Asian languages. In other words, it can be deemed a visual and auditory conflict and ideological struggle when reading Asian American poetry in the cultural territory of the mainstream audience. Because for native speakers of English, Asian languages are generally regarded as more exotic than other European languages. The exoticism, or racial otherness, of Asian languages decidedly affects how Asian American poetry is received by the American mainstream society or literary circles. Therefore, writing poetry in English while blending Asian languages into the context could be an alternative strategy to survive the marginalization resulting from both the society that adopts them and their own primary cultures of origination. Meanwhile, they earn themselves more opportunities of entering the publishing market as well as academic and literary realms by demonstrating their efforts and creativity. However, a certain degree of linguistic alienation is sure to follow as the tension between two different languages is ever-present and thus the sense of loss and estrangement is unavoidable, which means

Asian American poets cannot help but be seen as outsiders within two cultural terrains. In the light of this, Juliana Chang has made an attempt to argue for “resistant readings of Asian American poetic discourse as reformulating received notions of culture and language” (84). Far from being an individual matter, the “resistant readings” and writings of Asian American poetry against sense of loss and literary alienation can be seen in poems as varied—thematically and stylistically—as Wing Tek Lum’s “Translation,” Garrett Hongo’s “Ninety-Six Tears,” Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s “Chronicle,” Jessica Hagedorn’s “Song for My Father,” Marilyn Chin’s “That Half Is Almost Gone,” and Li-Young Lee’s “Persimmons.” In brief, the sense of loss about ethnic identity, the father figure, and languages, as mentioned above, inevitably necessitates the modern elegy

Conventional Elegy

Both Chin and Lee write poems entitled “elegy” as well as others directly and indirectly appealing to the idea of elegiac lamentations on death, mourning, and loss. Dating back to the sixth century B.C. in Greek and Roman literature, in its original sense the elegy had nothing to do with funereal verse

and mourning at all. Rhymed or unrhymed, the term denoted poems written in elegiac meter (i.e. alternating lines in dactylic hexameter and dactylic pentameter) and, contrary to contemporary expectations, typically conveyed thoughts about wars or aphorisms and complaints about love (Abrams 49). This generic usage was still prevalent among the Elizabethans and persisted until the end of the seventeenth century, according to the definition in Harmon and Holman's investigation (178-79).

A specific poetic form with bucolic content initiated by the ancient Greek poet Theocritus flourished in the third century B.C. and later became known as the pastoral elegy. In pastoral elegy, the mourned person, who is a poet more often than not, is represented as a shepherd. Since the sixteenth century the definition of "elegy" has narrowed to its present usage: "a formal and sustained lament in verse for the death of a particular person, usually ending in consolation" (Abrams 49-50), following paradigmatic elegies of English literature tradition in which a goatherd "successfully" mourns his dead poet friend at the end of the verse. It is roughly during the same period that the etymological provenance of the word "elegy" comes into being: in French it is *élégie* or in the Greek diction it is *elegeia* or *elegos*, meaning a mournful poem ("Elegy"). Edmund Spenser's *Astrophel* (1595), a "pastoral

elegy upon the death of the noble and valorous knight Sir Philip Sidney”, and John Milton’s long poem “Lycidas” (1638 [1645]), a monody dedicated to Edward King, a friend of Milton’s at Cambridge, who was “unfortunately drowned in his passage from Chester on the Irish Seas, 1637” (Milton 44),³ are widely known as hallmarks of the elegiac canon in English literature, which involves in lament for the loss of a beloved person, or a loved object, as psychoanalysts would designate. Since then, the elegy has gradually and virtually become poetry of mourning, setting forth meditations on the solemn theme of death.

What makes “Lycidas” significant is it being a representative work of the pastoral elegy convention, in which the consolatory paradigm is absorbed. The consolatory paradigm, started in the age of ancient Greek poet Theocritus and matured in time of Renaissance, suggests a therapeutic ideal that turns the grief and despair of the mourners in the poem into the feeling of joy and assurance, eventually leading to the lyric reversal that produces an effect close to catharsis, cleansing the mourner, the reader, and the elegist of their profound grief. A complete set of formula and convention has thus taken

³ This quotation comes from the headnote of “Lycidas.” “Lycidas” was first published in 1638, and when it was republished in 1645, Milton added the following headnote: “In this monody the author bewails a learned friend, unfortunately drowned in his passage from Chester in the Irish Seas, 1637; and, by occasion, foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy, then in their height” (Milton 44).

shape throughout the time: First, the lyric speaker begins by invoking the muses to help him express his grief. Then, all natural creatures under the sun come to mourn the shepherd—the dead poet. Third, the nymphs and other guardians of the dead poet are scourged for their negligence and not being able to fulfil their responsibility of protecting the shepherd. Next, a procession of mourners appears. Fifth, the poet heckles God about the justice and the Fate, and then he diverts the mournful content to the corrupt conditions of his own time and society. After that, quite a few descriptions about the hearse decorated by various sorts of flowers are often noted in post-Renaissance elegies. In the end, a strong closing consolation has changed sorrow and despair into joy and new hope, where the poet comes to realise that the death in this world signifies an eternal life in another better world. The elegist, in this regard, convinces the reader and the mourner of the death in this world and the conception that the death actually evinces the entry into a higher form of life.

Milton's "Lycidas" exemplifies the above formula. The last line of the 193-line poem: "Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new" symbolises a whole new start to the poet as well as the deceased like Lycidas, who is the poetic embodiment of Edward King. The consolatory mourning and pastoral

serenity are reinforced by the end rhymes of most of the lines and iambic pentameter, which conventionally render the poet's extreme grief resulting from the two adversities he met in that his mother died earlier in the same year. This poem, according to Peter M. Sacks, whose *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* fabulously interpreting the elegy and the work of mourning, was "Milton's extraordinarily ambitious imagination" (90) and is an "intriguing" illustration of "how the traditional forms and figures of elegy relate to the experience of loss and the search for consolation" (115; 1). Moreover, "Lycidas" not only bewails personal loss but also mourns society's moral disillusionment when such a talented and fervent youth as King was needed the most in the troubled times. The following four lines bring about the climax of the poem since the poet condemns the corruption of the English clergymen, severely berating them as "Blind mouths!": "Of other care they little reckoning make, / Than how to scramble at the shearers' feast, / And shove away the worthy bidden guest. / Blind mouths! That scarce themselves know how to hold / A sheep-hook" (Milton 47). In addition to mourning the death of King, this poem dialectically argues for the religious ideal interwoven with mournful affects, through both of which the poem makes the reader attain to a state of mind that is

magnanimous, critical, philosophical, and powerful. Consequently, viewing the elegy as “a symbolic action,” Sacks argues,

For the elegy, as a poem of mourning and consolation, has its roots in a dense matrix of rites and ceremonies, in the light of which many elegiac conventions should be recognized as being not only aesthetically interesting forms but also the literary versions of specific social and psychological practices. (1-2)

Before delving further into the two poets’ work, I would like to mention another poet who is a pioneer in making the elegy a reflection and meditation on such a solemn theme as human rights and equalitarianism in terms of social practices. In his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), Thomas Gray reveals a mournful tone and compassionate sentiment, which has to do with the era he lived in. Because of the rise of industry and bourgeois and their exploitation of the lower class in the eighteenth century, workers and farmers lived in impoverished circumstances. He noticed the depression in the countryside and thus he would like to exalt those humble people who got potential but were buried anonymously in a country churchyard in the end due to the cruelty of real life:

“The Curfeu tolls the Knell of parting Day,

The lowing Herd winds slowly o'er the Lea,
 The Plow-man homeward plods his weary Way,
 And leaves the World to Darkness, and to me.

[...]

The Boast of Heraldry, the Pomp of Pow'r,
 And all that Beauty, all that Wealth e'er gave,
 Awaits alike th' inevitable Hour.

The Paths of Glory lead but to the Grave.

[...]

Perhaps in this neglected Spot is laid
 Some Heart once pregnant with celestial Fire.

[...]

Chill Penury repress'd their noble Rage,
 And froze the genial Current of the Soul.

Full many a Gem of purest Ray serene,
 The dark unfathom'd Caves of Ocean bear:
 Full many a Flower is born to blush unseen,
 And waste its Sweetness on the desert Air." (2458-60)

Gray laments that those unknown people's "gem" talents were smothered by "chill penury" and that their "heart once pregnant with celestial fire" were frozen. However, everybody is equal in front of Death because eventually everyone will be laid in the Grave when "the inevitable Hour" comes. This poem contains profound thoughts for democracy, conveys the poet's commiseration for ordinary people, sneers at the "Power and Wealth," and protests against unequal institutions.

Modern Elegy

According to Sacks, “Each elegy is to be regarded, therefore, as a *work*, both in the commonly accepted meaning of a product and in the more dynamic sense of the working through of an impulse or experience—the sense that underlies Freud’s phrase ‘the work of mourning’” (1; italic original). Nonetheless, Li-Young Lee’s notion of elegy is more typical of the post-Freudian, post First World War “modern elegy” described by Jahan Ramazani in *The Poetry of Mourning*, rather than early Greek or Roman elegy, or the tradition of pastoral elegy associated with Milton and Shelley. Yet there are ways in which Lee too calls upon notions of loss that are far larger than the modern individual. His unique notion of elegy involves not only cultural but cosmic sense of loss. That state of mind is related to Lee’s notion of what he calls “universe mind.” In his conversation with Tod Marshall, Lee indicates that “poetry comes out of a need to somehow—in language—connect with universe mind, [...] and maybe all poetry is a quest, a poetry of longing” (Lee 2006: 125). People have the sense of a quest and longing because they are in need of something essential that they have lost or have longed for. That sense of loss and longing is embodied and exemplified in Lee’s critically-acclaimed signature poem “The City in Which I Love You.” This poem was published in

the book of the same title *The City in Which I Love You* (1990). He constructs an enigmatic city which at first sight seems to be bombed-out like cities devastated in the two World Wars, but then as the lines move on, it appears to be a postmodern multi-ethnic and multicultural city where people have lost their moral compass and they are being propelled by spiritual hunger:

And when, in the city in which I love you,
even my most excellent song goes unanswered,
and I mount the scabbed streets,
the long shouts of avenues,
and tunnel sunken night in search of you....

That I negotiate fog, bituminous
rain ringing like teeth into the beggar's tin,
or two men jackaling a third in some alley
weirdly lit by couch on fire, that I
drag my extinction in search of you....

Past the guarded schoolyards, the boarded-up churches, swastikaed
synagogues, defended houses of worship, past
newspapered windows of tenements, among the violated,
the prosecuted citizenry, throughout this
storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed
city I call home, in which I am a guest.... (Lee 1990: 51)

The scene of the chaotic world in trouble times presented in Lee's poem conveys a similar idea to the opening vision in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"

(1922):

April is the cruelest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.
 [...]
 Unreal City,
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
 I had not thought death had undone so many. (2147, 2149)

Both poems give vivid descriptions of spiritual desolation. Lee puts more emphasis on the clamour and commotion of the street while Eliot metaphorises and compares the dryness of the land to the barrenness of the mind. The city Lee portrays appears to be a collage of a bombed-out and devastated city as well as a postmodern illusory city where people are muddled by “fog” and “bituminous rain,” which symbolises that something infatuates and baffles people’s minds and thus they lose orientation, or any other thing that is supposed to be structured finely: the schools, the churches, the houses, the citizenry, or the city the speaker calls home. People also have to “jackal” a third person to satisfy their hunger, but still that is barely enough. In an interview with Reamy Jansen, Lee mentions that “Hunger is an emptiness. That’s why art is necessary. To remind ourselves of our solitude

and our silences: that's our original state. [...] art is the practice of our originality. And our original identity is that universe mind" (2006: 84). I would argue that what he terms "hunger" here involves lack and loss. In other words, because people lack something or lose something, they feel a sense of spiritual hunger and mental emptiness. And when being in that state, according to Lee, art, or in this instance, poetry, helps us to articulate the solitude and silences, and also to define and retrace our original identity. In Lee and Eliot's case, the original identity could be a pre-diasporic cultural identity since both of them are émigrés. Although Lee and Eliot portray the desolation of human mind in the modern world in different ways, they both expose the state of "extinction" and barrenness that remind us of how the loss can help us reflect upon ourselves and uncover the dark dimension of ourselves. In this regard, both poems can be seen in terms of modern elegy since they create a pristine space for grieving for the loss.

The elegy not only helps reflect upon death and loss but also embarks on observations and meditations on the metamorphosis of all things under the sun in a solemn mood. In accordance with Harmon and Holman's definition of "elegy" in the *Handbook to Literature* they edited, elegy means

a sustained and formal poem setting forth meditations on death or *another solemn theme*. The meditation often is occasioned by the death of a particular person, but it may be *a generalized observation or the expression of a solemn mood*. Common to both Latin and Greek literatures, the ‘elegy’ originally signified *almost any type of meditation*, whether *the reflective element* concerned death, love, or war, or *merely the presentation of information*. In classical writing the ‘elegy’ was more distinguishable by its use of the elegiac meter than by subject matter. The Elizabethans used the term for love poems, particular complaints. Up through the end of the seventeenth century, ‘elegy’ could mean both a love poem and a poem of mourning. (Harmon and Holman 178-79; *italics mine*)

Their exposition allows me to discuss and employ the term “elegy” in a much more flexible way within this exploration of these Asian American poets and to probe into it more deeply even though keeping in play its old-style usage. The “generalized observations or meditations on solemn theme,” “the expression of a solemn mood,” and “the reflective element or presentation of information” provide me with an approach to interpreting a wide variety of themes in the poetry of Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee.

Why Do We Need Elegies?

Gray’s concern in the famous elegy is one of the reasons why we need elegies much more in modern society than ever. He offers a good point of view to

look at his observation and meditation on the solemn theme like the life of the underprivileged minority. By the same token, in this world fraught with prejudice, discrimination, and hatred, I, as a bilingual literary researcher, intellectual, and humanist, would like to declare that doing a research on Asian American poetry involves not only my personal interest and choice but also my own concern over minority issues, ethnic awareness and justice in particular. As a consequence, the exploration into the Other as well as Asian American poetry are not simply a matter of academic interest but also a matter of ethical responsibilities.

In his landmark study of the role of elegy in modern culture, *The Poetry of Mourning* (1994), Jahan Ramazani asserts that we need elegies, “however disturbing, because our society often sugarcoats mourning in dubious comfort, or retreats from it in embarrassed silence, or pathologizes it, even locking it up in medical institutions” (1994: ix). Indeed, most people tend to think of elegy as a ritual to recall and mourn for the dead, hoping by writing or reading elegies the bereaved will be helped get over their grief and get some form of consolation. If the bereaved immerse themselves in sadness for a long time they will be pathologized and viewed as the weak and a weirdo. Ramazani thus further professes that “the modern elegy offers not a guide to

‘successful’ mourning but a spur to rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world” (ibid.).

I suggest we might contextualize what Ramazani terms the “vexed experience of grief” in our age as follows. We are living in an era when an aging population increase in numbers while the birth rate is plunging to a degree of minimisation, which is especially critical in some countries such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. A large middle-aged generation, among whom I am one, must face the death of their parents sooner or later. Besides, when various sorts of diseases such as AIDS, SARS, and COVID that can’t be cured with any medication are striking human beings and resulting in inevitable death, even medical staff cannot eschew the misfortune of being infected with diseases and die on duty. One friend of mine working as a professional doctor specialising in infectious diseases died just two days before the lunar new year in 2018. His three children are still very young; the youngest was only one year old. Thirdly, sudden and unexpected death is also the reason why we need elegies. Car accidents (like hit-and-run and drink-and-drive accidents), airplane crashes (e.g. Marilyn Chin’s partner died on 31st October 2000 because of the crash of Singapore Airlines Flight SQ006 in Taipei right after Chin got off the plane), and violent terrorist attacks (e.g. September 11

attacks (2001), 2996 dead; Bataclan Theatre Paris attack (2015), 89 killed; Berlin Christmas market lorry attack (2016), 12 dead; London Bridge attack (2017), 11 dead) catch people completely off guard. Natural disasters are also uncontrollable factors that cause death and loss. For instance, unpredictable earthquakes frequently snatch away a lot of lives within seconds. Anyone like me who lives in the Circum-Pacific Seismic Belt are in a profound dread whenever an earthquake of strong magnitude raids our land and we could have to face immediate casualties and damages, including a grave loss of properties and lives. Anyone who watches the appalling news footage would be shocked at the sight of those collapsed buildings as well as a large number of injured people and death tolls, especially when the huge tremors took place at late night, the time most people were sleeping. Earthquakes which hit central Taiwan on September 21st 1999, Tainan City in 2016, and Hualien City in 2018 have still left a heart-stricken memory and a painful mental scar on the mind of Taiwanese people collectively.

In addition, wars continue to take place in many countries or regions in the world, leading to hundreds of thousands of people being killed and being dislocated. The fate of refugees such as Syrian and Rohingya people is a vivid example. The three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi in red sweater lying

dead with his face down on the beach of Turkey received world-wide attention and sorrow. The miserable scene of many Syrian children gasping for their last breath after being attacked by chemical weapons was broadcast by various international media. The fact that many Afghans were desperate to leave the country is another example of people being involuntarily displaced because they were overtaken by uncertainty and fear. In August, 2021, the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan as well as its capital Kabul and other major cities within days after the U.S. military withdrew from the country. Afghan women are now again in deep distress and many people are even worried that radical terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS-K will again find safe haven there and remain a huge threat to the world's peace and security. On 24th of February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Both UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and US President, Joe Biden, claimed this could be the "biggest war in Europe since 1945."⁴ Major cities across Ukraine were under attack, including Chernihiv, Kharkiv, and the capital Kyiv, to name a few, which has

⁴ "Ukraine: Russia Plans Biggest War in Europe since 1945 - Boris Johnson." *BBC News*, BBC, 20 Feb. 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-60448162>. Accessed 15 May 2022.

Thomas, Jake. "Biden Says Russian Invasion of Ukraine Could Be 'Largest Invasion since WWII.'" *Newsweek*, Newsweek, 26 Jan. 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/biden-says-russian-invasion-ukraine-could-largest-invasion-since-wwii-1672945>. Accessed 15 May 2022.

caused the largest refugee crisis of massive population displaced, with more than six million Ukrainians fleeing the country, and also the serious humanitarian exigency of thousands of civilians being killed since WWII. Furthermore, people who perform prescribed or authorised duty, such as police, army, or medical staff, are all at high risk of dying suddenly and unexpectedly. Last but not least, more and more people suffer from mental illness, even breakdown, and this condition is found in crowds of young and teen students as well. Committing suicide is the very possible ending gesture they opt for, based on my own teaching experiences at senior high schools.

It is in such an unprecedented global world-order that elegy has acquired a special urgency and force. As Ramazani observes, modern elegists

have drawn upon and transformed an age-old language of mourning, alloying the profound insights of the past with the exigencies of the present. Out of this fusion they have forged a resonant yet credible vocabulary for grief in our time—elegies that erupt with all the violence and irresolution, all the guilt and ambivalence of modern mourning. (1994: ix)

He points out that “exigencies of the present” are the cause of the ambivalent state of mind coming afterwards with unexpected losses and of how modern elegies come to shape with “violence, irresolution, guilt, and ambivalence.”

Similarly, in “One Art,” Elizabeth Bishop depicts the violent intervention of that “exigencies of the present” by attempting to convert it into an art form. “The art of losing,” says Bishop calmly and ironically, “isn’t hard to master” (166). The poem records a range of losses from “door keys” and “my mother’s watch” to “places and names,” before expanding outwards to take in “two cities” and “some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent,” before finally focusing on the unnamed “you” (the poet’s female partner Lota de Macedo Soares), whose loss clearly prompted the poem. Bishop’s multiply exilic queer elegy registers not only intensely personal loss but the inherently trans-cultural, multiple geographical world she lived in. The irony connoted here is masterly enough to reflect the cruel fact that common mortals are too fragile to withstand sudden and unexpected losses because there are disasters “filled with the intent” to come about no matter what and no matter when (166). In the face of the “disasters” we are unaware and powerless more often than not. To know how to appreciate this “one art” and to “practice losing farther, losing faster” are what the poet asks us to do in this world full of losses, regrets, and sorrows (166). The “one art” suggests the poet has to be committed to what Freud calls “the work of mourning,” and that such “mastery” of loss needs work, art, time and discipline. This kind of poetic indulgence in prolonged

despondence and ambivalence is what Ramazani calls the modern elegy which resists the standard elegiac salves.

Bishop's poem highlights the importance of the modern elegy. We do not always want the kind of elegy which can "fix death, reverse loss, or cure bereavement" (Ramazani 1994: ix). On the contrary, we need "a mourning discourse more subtle and vivid" (ibid.). Bishop's "One Art" is one great example of sublimating the mourning for loss and moreover perpetuating it to the level of an eternal art, which needs "practice" to hear and to see. As a consequence, Ramazani advises us that "we should listen more carefully to the mourning tongues of our major poets" (1994: ix). Li-Young Lee's idea of a "universe mind" provides us with another channel to listen to the sound of the art of losing, or the poetry, which is from the universe. According to Lee, "universe mind" is "a mind that accomplishes a 360-degree seeing; it is manifold in consciousness, [...] That manifold quality of intention and consciousness: that feels to me like universe. So that's why I read poetry, and that's why I write it, to hear that voice, which is the voice of the universe" (2006: 125-26). So we get evidence from many of his poems that in order to hear that voice from the universe he writes poetry, including "The City in Which I Love You," which he focuses on noisiness and hunger to prove the

importance of silence and loss. Thereupon the sense of loss as well as the voice of the universe are interwoven as the elegy.

One of the purposes of this study is to ascertain the effect of modern elegy and to prove that we do need elegies to constantly remind ourselves of how important the different kinds of losses are to us and put ourselves in the shoes of others. While reading the elegies we develop the “universe mind,” which means we are more tolerant than we used to be, and so the world will be a better and more harmonious place. The other objective in this thesis is to address some important questions I have in mind and that the two Asian American poets—Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee—set forth by investigating their poetic works.

An Overview of My Research

Given the survey conducted concerning Asian American poetry and the elegy and the status of the fields as briefly reviewed, and the preceding research purposes stated above, this study sprouts from the three core research questions in my mind: First, how do experiences of mourning in Asian American culture differ from those in conventional Euro-American culture?

Second, more specifically, how do Asian American poets mourn for the loss of ethnic identity, family, and language? Third, what can modern elegists do to help people deal with the issue of various losses in life? To answer those questions, I would like to invest the elegy with a broader meaning. As T. S. Eliot declares in *Four Quartets*, “Every poem [is] an epitaph” (Eliot 197). Following his definition, I want to argue that there is a sense in which every poem can be regarded as one that is written in memory of someone who has passed away or something that has faded away. The poem can be inscribed either on a tombstone or in the minds of whoever has read it. The inscription of the poem is a move to make people remember what they have read as well as a mourning for the dead or the passing. In this sense, every poem can be deemed an elegy mourning for all sorts of losses. Yet the modern poets’ perpetuation and intensification of their literary dialogues with the dead and the passing are making modern poetry far more different from ancient verses. Their opinions about loss are woven in their poetry, incorporating more anger, anxiety, ambivalence, and scepticism than ever before.

I have to admit that I have not been able to do my research on Asian American literature in any of the American universities so far. I am hoping, however, that keeping a geographical and physical distance from where the

study of Asian American literature is mainly taking place might offer a good alternative perspective on it. Somebody who is working on South African writers such as J. M. Coetzee doesn't have to be in South Africa. The combination of physical detachment from and academic attachment to Asian American literature offers more reading possibilities. While I have been studying Asian American poetry in Taiwan and England, I hope I have been able to see and bring up something different from those studies done in the Asian American communities and the rest of the world. The elegy, after all, is written to mourn for loss and provide meditations on it. Addressing the lack of research on Asian American poetry from the perspective of the elegy, this thesis is my attempt to fill a small gap in the study of Asian American literature. While considerable attention has been paid in the past to research on Asian American literature, it should be noted that there have been few attempts to establish a direct relationship between Asian American poetry and the modern elegy. Perter Sacks's words happen to exhibit the niche of my research:

I do hope to use this study of the elegy as a perspective from which to reexamine the connections between language and the pathos of human consciousness. Of all genres, the elegy especially requires and provides such a perspective, for it is characterized by unusually

powerful intertwining of emotion and rhetoric, of loss and figuration.
(xii)

I hope in doing so my study seeks to contribute to our growing understanding of Asian American elegy, which is a previously ignored aspect of Asian American poetics. As a result, light could be shed on the study of Asian American elegy, which remains largely unknown and uninvestigated. I expect this research to offer a unique perspective for exploring Asian American poetry. In an effort to bridge the gap between the studies of different genres and fields, this thesis builds upon Freudian and Post-Freudian psychoanalytical readings of elegy, mourning, and melancholia as a way of engaging in close study of two of the most ambitious and influential Asian American contemporary poets. Thereupon this study may be critically contributive to laying the groundwork for Asian American poetics of elegy by conducting an in-depth analysis of the two poets' works rather than a general survey of a wider sample.

The thesis takes its bearing from readings of elegy, mourning, and melancholia by key critics such as Jahan Ramazani, Peter Sacks, David Kennedy, Patricia Rae, and Anne Cheng.⁵ Following the tradition of elegy,

⁵ Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Sacks, Peter M. *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.

Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee take it as a cultural genre which speaks to their concerns and translates a European form into the very different terms of reference of Asian American poets. Elegiac poems connote struggle, grief, and resilience in terms of their form, musicality, spirit, and content. In adopting the form of elegy, Chin and Lee embrace the conception of both assimilation and resistance and in doing so explore both attachment to and detachment from libido, in Freud's sense of desire for a loved object. As Chin writes in "Formosan Elegy," a poem in her 2014 poetry collection *Hard Love Province*:

I cry for you but no sound wells up in my throat
 I sing for you but my tears have dried in my gullet
 Walk the old dog give the budgies a cool bath
 Cut a tender melon let it bleed into memory
 [...]
 Birth and death the same blackened womb
 Birth and death the same white body bag
 Detach detach we enter the world alone
 Detach detach we leave the world bone lonely (Chin 2014: 20)

In *The Undressing* (2018), Lee inscribes his love for father in a commensurate way in "Stolen Good":

Kennedy, David. *Elegy*. London: Routledge, 2007. Rae, Patricia, ed. *Modernism and Mourning*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2007. Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.

I flushed twin doves
 from my father's unknown field.
 I missed them with my rocks and sling,
 but brought them to their knees
 with a shout of my father's name. (Lee 2018: 37)

Their lines of mourning delicately overlay the Asian American immigrant experiences with the melancholic rage of confessional poets of the fifties and sixties as well as the consolatory codes of traditionalist mode.

Both poets write of their ethnic concern in order to dig out Asian American rhetorical richness buried in forgotten histories, endowing their poems with voices to speak specific expressions of anger, hope, and grief. The digging up rather than burial of the memories and grief allows the poets to “[rethink] the vexed experience of grief in the modern world” in modern elegy, which is neither “a refuge for outworn nostalgias and consolations” nor “a guide to ‘successful’ mourning” (Ramazani 1994: ix). The grief in the modern elegy, as Ramazani further proposes, can be seen as what Freud terms “melancholic mourning,” serving “not to achieve but to resist consolation, not override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss” (Ramazani 1994: xi).

Focusing on ethnically Asian American or specifically Chinese American

poetry, I intend to explore the characteristics of a distinctly Asian American genre of melancholic mourning. Both of the Chinese American poets this thesis studies—Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee—write poetry in English. My research is thus limited to their English texts, although a very few of Chinese word characters and linguistic associations will be involved in my discussion. My personal cultural background links my mentality with both Chin's and Lee's poetry. The two poets' own experiences might have had influences on their poems, and what they convey in their poetry makes a tremendous impact on me because I can feel vivid connections to their Chinese imagination—a shared cultural and linguistic legacy—in their poems. Hence, I feel I am drawn to what is culturally Chinese in their work, since we all have this culture in common. In particular, the two poets I have chosen to study are both poets of the diaspora. Travelling to England to pursue a higher degree, I had a comparable feeling of being in exile, although it was a voluntary exile rather than a political or involuntary exile. These two established poets also come from similar backgrounds and diasporic trajectories (Lee from Indonesia, whereas Chin from Hong Kong), albeit offering two different poetic perspectives in terms of their gender. Most importantly, they are poets who work in recognisably autobiographical terms, exploring their complex dual or

multiple identities. They are amongst those who find elegiac voices most powerful, influential, persuasive, and effective when engaging in the combination of loss and resistance while moving between cultures and languages.

Marilyn Chin was one of the editors of *Dissident Song: A Contemporary Asian American Anthology*, which appeared in 1991. It could be said that these Asian American elegies themselves are a form of dissident song, and, though both of the Asian American poets I am studying write self-consciously in many different literary forms, and rarely in formal or generically elegiac style, I want to take cultural elegy as a model for their writing more generally, arguing that it is comparably grounded in psychoanalytic and literary tradition, and is born out of a profound experience of cultural conflict and estrangement, much of which turns on some form of protest or mourning. Mourning, according to Sigmund Freud's widely quoted essay "Mourning and Melancholia," is not only "the reaction to the loss of a loved person" but can also be a reaction "to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud 243). The loss of some abstraction, therefore, becomes a dynamic site to drive the self to redefine itself and enables a melancholic resistance within the ego. For Asian

American diasporic poets like Chin and Lee, I argue that cultural elegy serves as a good model to revalue and recuperate their cultural identity in terms of ethnicity, family, and language. Tracing a route of migration, suffering, and survival, the syncopated music of Chin and Lee's dissident songs incorporate cultural elegy into a larger narrative of Asian American literary histories.

This thesis is structured as follows:

The first chapter lays a focal emphasis on Chin's means of making the personal political as a way of representing the collective "racial melancholia" of both Asian immigrants and white Americans during the process of distanced assimilation. Constantly referring to her mother as a prototype and then moving on to other Asian immigrant women, who found it difficult to assimilate themselves to a new culture but also inherited the memory of suffering and starvation when they came to the U.S.A., the poet creates the feminist modern elegy of her unique style. The formation of racial melancholia can be ascribed to history, which has contributed to our comprehension of how historical ghostliness, I propose, comes into being in plumbing psychical injury and racial grief on the part of Asian Americans. The historical ghostliness of Asian Americans leads to the distancing of Asian American culture from the terrain of America's national culture in a way I

have called distanced assimilation, based on Lisa Lowe's notion of "an alternative cultural site" (Lowe 176), in which inevitable assimilation as well as protest and resistance take place. On the one hand, white America's ideal of racializing others is sustained by its own "exclusion-yet-retention" (Cheng 10) toward Asians through legalization. On the other hand, Asian immigrants' engagement is repudiated by means of legalized exclusion. Moreover, Asian Americans' mourning over the loss of the mother culture intensifies as their nostalgia and love for the mother country persist. Such melancholic ambivalence of attachment to and detachment from its counterpart brings about the racial melancholia of the melancholic subjects on the part of both Asian Americans and Euro-Americans. Marilyn Chin conveys her violent protest in "Blues on Yellow," the opening poem of her third book *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*: "If you cut my yellow wrists, I'll teach my yellow toes to write. / If you cut my yellow fists, I'll teach my yellow feet to fight" (Chin 2002: 13). Taking the form and rhythm of blues, associated with African American cultural history, this poem exploits the psyche of the melancholic subject and transposes personal grief onto public mourning, in which collective memory is aroused by its refusal to forget, preventing the work of mourning from being accomplished. Thus, diverse cultures and histories come to be transacted

into an Asian American poetics of diaspora which articulates a versatile ethnicity within Asian American elegy. Chin's purposeful attempts to leave the work of mourning undone and to turn racial melancholia into resistance are often displayed in the majority of her poems.

In the second chapter, I examine Li-Young Lee's perceptions of identity and family in relation to the Chinese diaspora. Because of his personal history of multiple exile with his family in his early years, feelings of loss, dispossession, dislocation, and spiritual emptiness are often found in his poems. His crisis of personal and familial identity is played out most distinctively when he writes in memory of his father, a sublime figure that symbolizes "a moving personal search for redemption" as Gerald Stern characterizes it in the "Foreword" to *Rose* (1986), Lee's first book of poetry. Therefore, I begin my discussion from how Lee reconstructs the father figure throughout each of his books of poetry and then I account for how Lee mourns for his late father atypically. The spiritual deprivation of his poetic speaker is especially foregrounded by the food trope of a lush meal when eating alone:

"White rice steaming, almost done. Sweet green peas / fried in onions.
Shrimp braised in sesame / oil and garlic. And my own loneliness. / What more could I, a young man, want" (Lee 1986: 33). As a matter of fact, the

father figure is articulated as a symbol of his lost cultural heritage, which he has been trying to retrieve but which remains like “wounds”: “Were it not for the rain / beginning, big drops slapping / the gravestones, then spreading / like wounds” (Lee 1986: 55). The “wounds,” if understood in Freudian terms, would “empty the ego until it is totally impoverished” (Freud 253). In this sense, the melancholia of the speaker as an exile takes shape, meditating on melancholic ambivalence and cultural alienation. Suffused with “measures of tenderness” (Lee 1986: 55) and pervaded by visions of mourning, Lee’s poems deal with his unique love for the family, including his parents, siblings, and his wife and children, on the grounds of displacement as his vision “between [his] eyes is always / the rain, the migrant rain” (69). Although the spiritual longing and repulsion toward the father figure take place at the same time, Lee wishes to attain a status he calls “final shapeliness” of life, death, and poetry in his poetic lines by virtue of the use of the metaphor—rose. In addition to the shapeliness that I have discussed, Lee is also in pursuit of otherness. I thus draw upon French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s idea of “the Other” and “face” to discuss the philosophical level of Lee’s poems and to demonstrate how the speaker in Lee’s poems responds to the Other and takes the responsibility of answering

the call and order of the Other. Furthermore, for Lee, familial narratives and parent-child relationships are at the heart of his representation of the experience of migrancy, persisting across two cultures. I argue that the conflicts and continuities between traditional patriarchal discipline on the one hand and the complex of double identities of second-generation children on the other are crucial to understanding his work. At the formal level, the confessional self-revelation of his inner worlds, his autobiographical subject matter, and intimate relationships to the family is also decisive because through such individual confessional accounts the multilayered histories of Chinese immigrant elegy more generally can be unravelled. In short, both Jahan Ramazani's idea of modern elegy and Levinas's ethics of the Other will help this chapter reconstruct the familial narrative in the imagined homeland and re-evaluate relationship between Asian American elegists and the elegized with a syncretism, of inclusion and exclusion, Chineseness and Americanness, past and present.

The third chapter sets out to explore the ways both poets mediate their cultural identity by foregrounding memory and linguistic loss to investigate the point of convergence between different worlds, cultures, and languages. Of the many themes present in Asian American writing generally, language

has been one that poets are obsessed with since what Lee calls in “Rain Diary” a “divided tongue” is central to migrant experience, an ambivalence which can be mentally and physically debilitating but also, as these poets show, profoundly dynamic. This divide between English and the mother tongue drives Asian American diasporas to transform their cultural identity within the context of America. Poets such as Chin and Lee take advantage of their dislocation, engrafting Chinese culture, histories, and allusions onto an English language cultural landscape, while also translating the untranslatable into a new transfusion of multivalent metaphors, enabling them to form their distinctive subjectivities. In addition, with the use of figurative devices, metaphor in particular, the process of hybridization is represented and thus gain and loss are ineluctable. The gain and loss thus form a dynamic, which I would term “creative mourning” in the third space between cultures. In this regard, Levinas’s ethics of the Other is again put to use. The Other poses an immediate interpellation and the imperative of language that would protect and undergird poetic subjectivity of Asian American poets. For instance, in one of his most directly autobiographical poems, Lee recounts his cross-cultural experience of learning English in the primary school as a young immigrant in America: “In sixth grade Mrs. Walker / slapped the back of my

head / and made me stand in the corner / for not knowing the difference /
 between *persimmon* and *precision*. / How to choose / persimmons. This is
 precision” (Lee 1986: 17). Such linguistic multiplicity and metaphorical
 density enable poetry to become a rich site for linguistic, ideological, and
 intercultural exchanges. The hybridity of languages in Asian American
 poetry, in terms of Jacques Lacan’s re-reading of a game about a child’s
 cognition of loss widely discussed in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*
 (1920), corresponds to the dialectical realm of presence/absence of mother
 tongue and a second language. In this sense, elegy works as a fundamental
 point of entry to the symbolic order of language and a crucial model of how to
 read Asian American poetry. Since elegy deals with loss of a loved object,
 “loss and separation,” as David Kennedy notes, “are the crucial systemic
 pressures of that order” (Kennedy 48), effecting a hybrid dynamic of
 mastering languages and losing them while learning to live with the loss. So
 reading Chin and Lee’s poems as cultural elegy dramatizes the synchronic
 coexistence of Eastern and Western cultures, leading to the proliferation of a
 new hybridized and divided tongue.

By drawing upon Freudian and Post-Freudian readings of mourning and
 melancholia, this thesis intends not only to offer a way of reading these two

complex trans-cultural poets but to build up a model in which ethnicity, family, and language are incorporated on the basis of ideological protest in mourning and melancholia. In that sense, a normal and conventional elegy is transformed into a cultural elegy with a political dimension. Underscored by irreconcilable mourning and activist melancholia, the elegiac tone presented in Chin and Lee's poetry can serve the interest of a larger "tribe"—the Asian American community—amounting to psychic protests against a dominant white American ideology and symbolic order that reduces the meaning of the racialized other. Writing out the histories of Asian American language, family, and ethnicity, these two Asian American poets—Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee—makes their "rhapsody"⁶ heard by means of the modern cultural elegy.

⁶ Referring to Chin's "Rhapsody in Plain Yellow" in her book of poems of the same title.

Chapter 1
“She Walks into Exile Vowing No Return”:
Distanced Assimilation in Marilyn Chin’s Poetry

In a fascinating conversation in the 1995 public television series *The Language of Life*, Marilyn Chin claimed: “I believe I belong with my passport. I see myself and my identity as nonstatic. I see myself as a frontier, and I see my limits as limitless” (Chin 1995: 67). This was in response to the host Bill Moyers’s first big question: “Where do you most belong?” Apart from the actual passport which displays one’s national citizenship, Chin possesses her imagination which acts as an invisible cultural passport to transport her among various Pacific Rim countries because she says “my muse is open to infinite possibilities” (Chin 2002b: 67). These possibilities, as I will argue in this chapter, include those of modern elegy. With her muse moving across geographical, political, and ideological borders, the poet’s identity, as she claims, is profoundly nonstatic and her poetry is empowered with the agency of what Jahan Ramazani calls transnational poetics, albeit often with an elegiac force. In an interview with Jane Wong in 2018 about her recently published new and selected poems, *A Portrait of the Self as Nation*, she said:

I have somewhat a transnational life. I can’t seem to sit still. I had a nightmare where Trump came into my bedroom and took away my

citizenship papers. The imagination must have the freedom to play. Sometimes, I feel like a citizen of the world. Sometimes, I'm bitterly solitary and feel stateless. But, of course, I have an American passport, which I understand is a privilege. I am not stateless but am a restless perambulator. (Jane Wong, 2018)

Nevertheless, historical forces have also helped shape her mutable “transnational” identity as an Asian living in the U.S.A. Transnational relationships are always mediated by national histories, and before looking in more detail at Chin’s work I would like to briefly sketch the historical background that helps define the nature of contemporary Asian American identities. One of these historical forces can be traced back to the nineteenth century when a large number of Chinese labourers were introduced to the U.S.A. to help build the transcontinental railroads and were later barred from entry to American territory as a result of “the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first American immigration policy to target the citizens of a single nation” (Hsu 958). Such immigration acts legitimated discrimination and racial estrangement in the wake of utilizing Chinese labour forces, resulting in distancing Asian American culture from the terrain of America’s national culture in ways that continue to have an impact today.

Historical records provide a crucial “beginning” of debates about and representations of assimilation. As Chin says at the very beginning of her

debut book, “The beginning is always difficult. / The immigrant worked his knuckles to the bone / only to die under the wheels of the railroad” (Chin 1987: 3). “The beginning” thus created a space for debates about early Chinese immigration and assimilation into the U.S.A. as well as a distance and a gap between Asians and Americans. Lisa Lowe in her influential contribution to cultural studies *Immigrant Acts* (1996) has argued that “the distance has created the conditions for the emergence of Asian American culture as an *alternative cultural site*, a site of cultural forms that propose, enact, and embody subjects and practices not contained by the narrative of American citizenship” (176; emphasis mine). Historically, Chinese and other Asian immigrants were included in the workplace of the American infrastructure due to the country’s national economic imperatives but simultaneously excluded from national culture and political citizenship. This racialized history continues to haunt the memory of Asian Americans, persisting beyond the end of World War II when Japanese immigrants were released from the internment camps and even beyond the repeal of the Exclusion Act in 1943, which by then had lasted for more than six decades. In her edited historiographical volume *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943*, which documents the racialized

and traumatic history of Asian Americans, Sucheng Chan comments that “Asian immigration history consequently shows more distinct ‘breaks’ than that of Europeans, periodized not so much by social developments within the immigrant communities as by the enactment of exclusion laws” (Chan 1991a: viii). Numerous historical events have then embodied racialization in America “through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others” (10), as Anne Anlin Cheng argues in her thorough investigation of the racialized politics and history of Asian Americans in her volume *The Melancholy of Race* (2001).

In this decisive political and historical atmosphere, Asian immigrants in the U.S.A. were directed by historical forces to an alternative site which could generate a new form of literary, cultural, and aesthetic production different from those in the mainlands of Asia and America. The alternative site of cultural practices, according to Lowe, is

the terrain through which the individual speaks as a member of the contemporary national collectivity, but culture is also a mediation of history, the site through which the past returns and is remembered, however fragmented, imperfect, or disavowed. Through that remembering, that recomposition, new forms of subjectivity and community are thought and signified. (x)

It is this alternative cultural site that Asian Americans tend to work within.

In relation to it, I propose the term “distanced assimilation” on the ground of its distancing of Asian immigrants politically and culturally from the dominant American public sphere. Such distanced assimilation allows Asian American writers to remember the history of immigrants and critique the political practice of the dominant culture from an alternative transnational site, where there is no fixed boundary and identity is unstable.

Consequently, poets like Chin start to emerge in the late twentieth century speaking individually for the collective community with a powerful imaginative “passport,” representing a nonstatic and multiple identity, which varies depending on what voice she adopts to critique the American culture.

The remarkable emergence of Asian American poets and poetry in the late twentieth century was partly prompted by the historical forces mentioned above as well as the influence of the African American Civil Rights Movement, which led to the passage of Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Immigration and Nationality Act was passed in 1965, legally stopping the racial discrimination “favouring immigrants from northern Europe” and dramatically opening entry to immigrants from places other than Europe, according to Ramazani

(Ramazani et al. 2003: lxiii). With the enlargement of civil rights and the liberalisation of immigration laws, there was a radical demographic and cultural change in the U.S.A. Literary production among minority immigrant communities thus began to take off and new generations of poets and writers of Asian origins emerged. Each group of Asian poets who went through this crucial transitional phase of history correspond to what Marilyn Chin signals in her poem “the beginning of an end, the end of a beginning” (Chin 1987: 3). These poets imperatively devoted themselves to figuring out their complex double cultural identities and documenting the cultural histories they were part of. That is why, as Guiyou Huang argues, during the civil rights movement, “poetry was used as an instrument of political rallies seeking to find voice and celebrate racial pride” and how “a racialized poetry charged with political messages” flourished (Huang 3). These historical, political, and social factors led to the fact that, as Ian Hamilton says, “the inscription of each of these histories, especially in poetry, has been voluminous [...] in the liberating cultural aftermath of the 1960s” (Hamilton 19).

It is important to bear these factors in mind when turning to the poetry of Marilyn Chin, whose work I will be considering in terms of Anne Cheng’s idea of the “melancholy of race” in America, and a poetics of both protest and

elegy. Emigrating with her family to the United States soon after she was born in 1955 in Hong Kong, Marilyn Chin was raised in Portland, Oregon and received her higher education in the 1970s and 1980s, when she witnessed the shift of social atmosphere, which helped generate her belief in a need to search for an alternative identity besides “Asian” and/or “American,” and to pursue a feminist agenda in a period where women’s writing and experience was being re-evaluated. In her foreword to *Making More Waves: New Writing by American Asian Women* (1997), Jessica Hagedorn describes Chin’s poem “A Portrait of the Self as Nation, 1990-1991” as “an ironic manifesto” for the anthology itself, because of the way the poem portrays the self “as battleground and as defiant nation, the self as illuminating poem and story, the self as dark song of memory and resistance” (x).

Inspired by the political debates inaugurated by the Civil Right Movement, Chin has said that she is driven to write poetry for political reasons, and in particular the need to speak for those who have been deprived of a voice. This includes the voice of the American Asian women Jessica Hagedorn speaks of. Chin has also clearly influenced contemporary second wave American feminism, which developed in the same period. She speaks unequivocally in interviews with Catherine Cucinella, affirming that “I see

myself as an activist poet” and that “as I write, I think about the personal as representing something larger than myself” (Chin 2010: 134-35). She further asserts that “[her] best work is a conflation of vivid lyric and political and social critique” (135). She has reaffirmed her commitment to being a political poet time and again in other conversations, declaring that she is writing her self-experiences in the hope of making the world view them as representative of the collective experience of Asian women immigrants.

When composing poetry, she tells Moyers, she seeks to make the personal political: “Everything must begin with the self” (Chin 1995: 75). This deliberate move, I argue, runs the risk of homogenizing the multitudes of different ethnic groups of Asian origin in the U.S.A., since the issues at stake are ultimately multiple and irresolvable, as Homi Bhabha suggests: “the liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one; there is no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently enjoined in the survival of migrant life” (224). Nonetheless, Chin endeavours to translate her personal history into political fronts that can be made sense of more generally. Living in the interstices between very different cultures and caught in-between different worlds, she occupies an alternative space in which she articulates an ideology of resistance against the

dominant cultures, while also, as we shall see, seeking to process her yearning and mourning for her mother, who embodies the Chinese past.

Her Feminist Modern Elegy

Interviewed in 2018, Chin related her instinctive feminism to her bond with her mother, and her mother's tragic history, talking about the "wound" that led to her poetry in directly autobiographical terms:

My wound is really my mother. I felt that my mother sacrificed her life and was destroyed by the Confucian system by this male-dominated world. My mother was a very Buddhist, good woman. My father was a polygamist. I felt that she suffered greatly. She stopped eating and died in 1962. She didn't want to live. I felt that I needed to somehow seek revenge for her.

The feminism is personal, political, familial and social. I didn't become a feminist just because I read all this feminist theory in college and grad school. I became a feminist because I really felt for my mother's generation and for my mother in particular. Every morning I think about her and her suffering and sacrifice.

Without this wound I don't think I would have become a poet. Poetry, I believe, is a genre that's closest to the heart. I really felt my mother's suffering. It's really about avenging my mother's pain. My mother's pain is my pain. (MacDonald, 2018)

Chin admits to having read feminist theory at college and grad school, but associates it above all with her mother, who therefore not only represents her Chinese cultural heritage, but also the historical oppression of women within “the Confucian tradition of this male-dominated world.” Elsewhere, Chin has talked about the impact of the pioneering feminist poet Adrienne Rich as “a powerful inspirational role model” for her during her undergraduate years at Amherst, presenting her as “the constant voice of conscience” in her ear (Weisner, 2014). In her work, she brings that feminist voice to bear on her position as an Asian American woman, grappling with comparable problems from a different angle.

In the same interview, she gives a fuller account of her indebtedness to West Coast feminist activism, saying that:

In *Hard Love Province*, I pay homage to many teachers and muses. It’s time to give gratitude. We’ve lost some important poets in California: I miss the mentorship of Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, Wanda Coleman, and others. “Live worthily and die bravely.” Yes, I am still that activist poet. I began many years ago with the promise that I want to write an “activist” poetry. I guess that I was raised in that revolutionary moment: when feminism, minority discourse, civil rights all merged together toward the fight for social change...Nellie Wong, Mitsu Yamada, Meryl Woo, Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Wanda Coleman, Janice Mirikitani, Genny Lim, Maxine Hong Kingston, Angela Davis—West Coast wild women of color aesthetics. And Asian American activism on campuses...the

Berkeley campus steaming with activity, students marching together to get an Asian American Studies program at UCI...I don't have the stamina of a real boots-on-the-ground activist, but I want to perform "revolution" in my poetry. If that is at all possible. I suppose there is a West Coast, transnational Chinese American feminist consciousness that grounds my poems. (Weisner, 2014)

Her words capture something of the context in which she developed her own thinking, and the larger political activism, in which she began her work.

Retrieving her Chinese heritage as a woman within the U.S. context is one of Chin's avowed ambitions. She gave a powerful speech in Hamline University in 2002 to explain why she always takes a political stance in her poetry, announcing:

I am an immigrant poet. By accident, I became the spokesperson for other immigrant poets; they are my tribe. It's all part of the telling of the self, of one's history [...] The reason why I want to speak for the larger community is that I want to hang on to that Chinese past. It's an impossible task because the vector only goes in one direction and that direction is towards assimilation. (Chin 2002c)

She makes it clear that she is not writing merely about her self but the history of the larger, multinational "tribe" of Asian (or more specifically "Chinese") immigrants in America, especially women. Another even more striking reason is that the poet is highly aware of the identity vector moving

ineluctably toward assimilation. Taking a political and feminist stance interstitially within an alternative site thereby empowers her to resist the overwhelming pressure towards assimilation in terms of language, culture, and identity politics.

Not every immigrant, however, finds this survival strategy useful to accommodate himself or herself in the condition of double or even triple, marginalization. Some of Chin's poems are written to mourn for and pay tribute to her mother and figures like her who cannot successfully negotiate a new life in a foreign country as they suffer from depression. She mentions in a 2010 interview that her mother insisted on a hunger strike in the last year of her life as an expression of a firm volition to die. The drop scene of her mother's life story, according to Chin, was her "last protest" where "she expressed her anger with self-immolation and self-denial" (Chin 2010: 141).

In other words, Chin frames it in feminist terms, as in the interview. Actually, lyric personae in Chin's poems like her mother, Chloe Nguyen, and Diana Toy can all be interpreted in Anne Anlin Cheng's term as melancholic subjects in Asian America. Chin's second book, *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty*, has a section entitled "The Tao and the Art of Leavetaking," including the poem "Sad Guitar," representing a female figure of an immigrant, mourning

her homeland (among other things). Such melancholic mourning is pervasive in Chin. According to Chin's account, her mother's life story is a really sad one of an Asian immigrant woman who "immolates" herself in the face of both racial and patriarchal oppression:

In my poems, I can't seem to forgive my father's betrayal: can't forgive both the Confucian/patriarchal world that created him and the Western capitalist world for corrupting him. I blame both worlds for his destruction and the destruction of my mother. (Chin 2004: 116)

In Chin's mind both the Confucian/patriarchal world and the Western capitalist world led to the destruction of her parents so she wants to not only record the history but also voice indignation for her mother, giving justice to her: "I think more than my yearning for justice is my yearning to memorialize her. She was an ordinary woman, an immigrant; she couldn't speak English; she embraced traditional Chinese values; she was passive, gentle, kind. She was a good woman who deserved more happiness. We can say this about all our mothers. The quatrains read like little epitaphs, and even are shaped like headstones.... In this book, I wanted form and content to work together to both praise her and mourn her. The world is unforgiving; the despair is deep. But, within these precise lines and images, I hope that this daughter

has honed a radiant way to honor her beloved mother” (Chin 2004: 117). In order to mourn her mother, Chin writes quatrains like the following in

“Chinese Quatrains (The Woman in Tomb 44)”:

Disc of jade for her eyelids
A lozenge of pearl for her throat
Lapis and kudzu in her nostrils
They will rob her again and again. (Chin 2002a: 26)

Jewels accompanying her mother’s body represents honour and wealth that will go with her soul to another world, which resembles the ritual of ancient Greeks who would have the hero’s eyelids bejewelled to distinguish his status. Moreover, those gems also symbolise cultural heritages, which Chin regards as the most precious asset that an immigrant family has but also as cultural capital in danger of being embezzled and appropriated by “the Western capitalist world,” which is likely to consume her Chinese cultural background to an extent that racial prejudice and discrimination are still pervasive enough to trigger Chin’s resentment. Chin is very good at turning that sense of resentment into pungent poetry, which I would categorise as “mordant modern elegy.”

Chin values both the artistic quality and political practicality of poetry as

she believes that “poetry helps [her] to describe the ineffable, the seen and unseen, and the heartbreak of living” (Chin 2002b: 67). She goes on, “poetry is a medium that is closest to our hearts and it can give voice to those who have been denied a voice” (67). Chin’s feminist treatment of her mother as a woman who bears the history of wrestling with racial and patriarchal domination is underwritten by her more general sense that “it’s important to know your mother [...] It’s important to know history and all the triumphs and failings of your people” (Chin 2004: 114). “It’s important to know your mother” is bound up with knowing history, but also with the feminist critique she brings to her understanding of her mother. The first part of her first book, *Dwarf Bamboo*, has the title “The Parent Node,” suggesting the importance of “transplantation” and underlining her commitment to trans-generational and cross-cultural inheritance, with poems set in China and Japan, exploring cultural and familial history, often with her mother’s history at their centre.

Chin’s mother had suffered from hunger strike, and this leads Chin to seek to understand the innermost world of her mother in terms of both appetite and food culture, and meditate on how food matters to one’s body and mind. Chin explicitly points out that food is always associated with

“feasting and celebration,” but “on the flip side, famine and poverty” (Chin 2010: 141-42). She also talks about the traumatic Chinese history vacillating between feasting and starving owing to droughts, plagues of vermin, natural blights, or man-made disasters. And because of her matriarchs’ Chinese upbringings, Chin believes that her mother’s choice of hunger strike has to do with her mental deprivation of being a rootless immigrant in a foreign land. Hence the food trope is not merely about sense of satiation and abundance, it is more about starvation, deprivation, and loss, in terms of both physiology and mentality. In her poems about her mother and more generally, she also seeks to understand the important role food plays in Chinese history and culture. For instance, in “Gruel” in *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty*, Chin addresses a young anorexic woman named Diana Toy,

This is the philosophy of your tong:
 you, the child, must learn to understand the universe
 through the port-of-entry, your mouth,
 to discern bitter from sweet, pungent from bland. (Chin 1994: 59)

This poem focuses on Diana Toy, and puns on a psychically impoverished Asian American’s food in a psychiatric hospital (“And all you may have for breakfast is rice gruel”) but also on a whole familial and cultural inheritance:

Meat or gruel, wine or ghee,
 even if it's gruel, even if it's nothing,
 that gruel, that nothingness will shine
 into the oil of your mother's scrap-iron wok,
 into the glare of your father's cleaver,
 and dance in your porcelain bowl. (ibid.)

The image conjures up a whole culture, reminding us of her forebears as Chinese peasants who had to endure repeating cycles of plentiful harvest and natural disasters like droughts and locusts. While food sustains hundreds of thousands of people's lives when in abundance, it can be a destructive force if there is none, and is always bound up with work (the "wok" and "cleaver" of the poem) and fundamental relationships to culture. Food, therefore, as a cultural symbol contains dual meanings of feasting and starving. The food trope was not only traumatic for Chinese civilians in the past but remains emotionally disturbing for those who are displaced and rootless, feeling spiritually starved, like the female figure in "Gruel," as the poem says, who

may have for breakfast is rice gruel.
 You can't spit it back into the cauldron for it would be unfilial.
 You can't ask for yam gruel for there is none.
 You can't hide it in the corner for it would surely be found,
 and then you would be served cold, stale rice gruel. (ibid.)

Criticising that someone is unfilial for what he or she does is traditional Chinese moral lesson because the younger's behaviour is not expected by the elders. Yam gruel or sweet potato gruel is very typical breakfast of Chinese farming family. The triple imperatives of "You can't" signify that even a psychically disordered immigrant is still tied down to her conventional Chinese doctrines. However, she can neither spit her Chinese cultivation back nor pursue what she aspires after because she would be condemned as being unfilial and punished. This perhaps is an awkward situation that many displaced Chinese Americans are in and the situation may get worse when it comes to women for they would always be tagged "unfilial," unchaste, or disobedient, which would be apt to result in the spiritual ambivalence, inanition, starvation and loss, and even scar and trauma.

Referring to her mother and other Asian immigrant women, who found it difficult to assimilate themselves to a new culture and inherited the memory of suffering and starvation when they went to the U.S.A., the poet makes use of the food trope as a major motif in her work showing her concern for issues associated with assimilation. "They nail her [Chin's mother] coffin with exactitude, and yet there is no resolution: I want to give the impression that the suffering will go on for generations" (Chin 2004: 116-17), Chin laments

over her loss of mother and her mother's loss, and she also speaks in unequivocal terms: "My mourning for her and, by extension, my mourning for mothers in general and for the victimized other, I believe, honor the silent majority of discarded women in the world" (Chin 2004: 117). Here Chin comments on her mother's life story with "unforgiving finality" (Chin 2004: 116) and she explains that "this urge to make things write (right) for my mother and for all mothers turned me into a social activist and made me take on women's issues. [...] So my "urge" to take on women's issues, identity issues, minority issues, etc., is deeply integrated in my work. I believe that, for my life to have meaning, I must have that integrative whole between my social consciousness and creative production" (Chin 2004: 112). Diana Toy could be an epitome of any silent, discarded, and victimized woman in the world like Chin's mother. By means of depicting the victimized other consuming gruel "through the port-of-entry, [her] mouth," Chin delicately reveals not only the spiritual sparsity but also the melancholic propensity of an elegiac figure. In this aspect, consuming gruel seems like devouring her Chinese ego, in terms of Freudian mourning and melancholy.⁷ I would like to further argue that the poet's social activist consciousness arises from her

⁷ "The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it." (Freud 249-50)

mother's, the victimized other's, and her own rage on the inner substitute (gruel) for the lost object (motherland, cultural heritage, women's autonomy...etc.). And the poet feels that urge and then spews it through the port-of-exit, her mouth, to mourn the suffering of "the silent majority of discarded women in the world." She makes things write (right) in her poems for her mother and all victimized females to prolong the suffering and grief of loss instead of surpassing the anger and desolation deriving from the state of the ego, the dignity, and the self being destroyed by both the Confucian/patriarchal world and the Western capitalist world. As a consequence, Chin's creative production is considered without a doubt modern elegy.

Both physical starvation and psychic depletion can stem from the psychic injury brought about as a result of the melancholic racialization of Asians in America. In analysing the racially melancholic history of Asian Americans, Cheng argues bluntly that "melancholia thus describes both an American ideological dilemma and its constitutional practices" (11). In other words, though many complex factors are in play, the legacy of the exclusion laws can hardly be absolved from the blame. That's why Cheng suggests "we might then say that melancholia does not simply denote a *condition* of grief but is,

rather, a *legislation* of grief” (8; emphasis original). She further expounds:

“Melancholia thus denotes a condition of endless self-impoverishment. [...]

The melancholic eats the lost object—feeds on it” (8). In this case,

melancholia can be deemed a kind of consumption. The psychic

impoverishment is proved to be an essential drive for melancholic resistance,

which is embodied in Chin’s mother and other figures in her poems such as

“Gruel” mentioned earlier, or “Turtle Soup” where the speaker laments:

“‘Sometimes you’re the life, sometimes the sacrifice.’ / Her sobbing is

inconsolable” (Chin 1994: 24). Chin writes of angry, impoverished, and

deep-rooted mental affects experienced by Asian Americans both in her own

personal voice and as part of a collective response to represent vacillations of

identity in assimilating to American culture.

On the other hand, for Cheng, “dominant white identity in America operates melancholically—as an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social consumption-and-denial” (11). Legalized rejection as well as incorporation of non-white Americans hence constitutes what Cheng terms “white racial melancholia” (12), which can be traced back to the U.S.’s founding years when the country was founded on the basis of humanity and liberty while its ideals have been repeatedly betrayed by various forms of

institutionalized racism, including slavery.

In addition to being the melancholic objects of white racial melancholia, Asian Americans are themselves melancholic subjects as well. On the one side, according to Cheng, they experience denial in resisting dominant political oppression and delight in reaping economic benefits. On the other, I propose, their dismay at the loss of the mother culture intensifies as their nostalgia and love for the mother culture persist. In terms of the Freudian logic of melancholia, as the libido of delight and love turns back on the ego of the melancholic subject after the loss of the desired object, he or she introjects what he or she resents and melancholia comes into being. The emptiness of the ego leads to its own self-denigration and denotes self-impoverishment because the melancholic devours the lost object. This double melancholic ambivalence, I argue, contributes to melancholic subject formation and helps us comprehend the need for Asian Americans to mourn the loss of their original cultural heritage, and Chin to mourn her mother.

In this regard, the double ambivalence of the melancholic subject offers a powerful racial dynamics to empower the racialized other while they occupy the ghostly role of “the foreigner within” (Cheng 10). The racialized other thus, I will argue, turns into a particular locus for directing protest at the loss

of their cultural heritage outside America as well as investing in assimilation to the new cultural terrain within it.

Behind Cheng's analysis of racial melancholia, of course, lies Freud's analysis of grieving, "Mourning and Melancholia," and nearly a century of commentary on it. Freud is also at the heart of Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning* (1994), a reflection on one of modernity's pervasive literary genre and one which has a profound bearing on Chin's poetry, with its persistent investment in elegy. In contrast to normative mourning, "melancholic mourning," as Ramazani proposes in his study of modern poetic elegy, "tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (Ramazani 1994: xi). Based on the Freudian idea of "an open wound," Ramazani suggests that the modern elegy does not work as a "suture," nor as "transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it" (4). Leaving the wound open demonstrates the modern elegists' recalcitrant and culturally specific operation on the elegy. Another condition that, according to Freud, happens to the melancholic is "an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale" (246). In brief, Freud draws up a useful and crucial distinction: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in

melancholia it is the ego itself" (246).

No matter whether it is Freudian "melancholia," or what Ramazani terms "melancholic mourning," what Cheng dubs "racial melancholia," or what Patricia Rae calls "resistant mourning," these terms all register a sense of protest since, as Rae argues, they

leave mourning unresolved without endorsing evasion or repression; indeed they portray the failure to confront or know exactly what has been lost as damaging. They encourage remembering where memory has been repressed, and they expose the social determinants for troublesome amnesia. At the same time, they resist the narratives and tropes that would bring grief through to catharsis, thus provoking questions about what caused the loss, or about the work that must be done before it is rightly overcome. They raise questions about the social forces that have prevented the work of mourning from being accomplished, and they offer alternatives to the consolatory strategies that have been widely deployed and that threaten to introduce a whole new round of loss and grieving. (Rae 22-23)

It is clear how the imbricated relationships between melancholia and loss work to stimulate cultural dynamics, helping racialized others deploy an alternative axis to mourn over the loss of their cultural heritage even as they assert their identity in a new world.

In what follows I will seek to explore how melancholic ideology of the kinds we have been considering is incorporated into Chin's poetry in terms of

elegy, and in particular what we might call cultural elegy.

Historical Ghostliness

In a self-referential poem entitled “How I Got That Name,” published in *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (1994), Chin writes: “She was neither black nor white, / neither cherished nor vanquished” (Chin 1994: 18). It is this kind of neither-nor ambivalence that contributes to her representation of racial melancholia. The formation of racial melancholia, as noted earlier, can be traced back to the initial stage when Asian immigrants first appeared in the U.S. and the period when various acts of exclusion were implemented. In other words, history has contributed to our comprehension of how a certain kind of historical ghostliness, I propose, comes into being in plumbing psychical injury and racial grief on the part of Asian Americans. Lisa Lowe has incisively probed the relationship between history and the racialization of Asian Americans:

Historically and materially, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Asian Indian, and Filipino immigrants have played absolutely crucial roles in the building and the sustaining of America; and at certain times, these immigrants have been fundamental to the construction of the nation

as a simulacrum of inclusiveness. Yet the project of imagining the nation as homogeneous requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come as fundamentally ‘foreign’ origins antipathetic to the modern American society that ‘discovers,’ ‘welcomes,’ and ‘domesticates’ them. (Lowe 5)

This passage gives a lucid view of the contradiction that the American society has been facing: the attachment to as well as the resentment against Asian immigrants in America. Nevertheless, historical memory tends to overlook Asian America since the dyad of black and white as the main racial categories has long shaded other racialized minorities. The discursive exploration of Asian America does not occupy an eminent space until the increasing quantity of readership, authors, and critical discussion in 1970s. Anne Cheng’s work on melancholy and racialization offers a useful perspective on Chin’s work in this respect. She accentuates the historical ghostliness of Asian Americans and laments that

the racialization of Asian Americans is in some ways more apparently melancholic than that of African Americans in American history in the sense that the history of virulent racism directed against Asians and Asian Americans has been at once consistently upheld and denied. Shuttling between ‘black’ and ‘white’—the Scylla and Charybdis between which all American immigrants have had to ‘pass’—Asian Americans occupy a truly ghostly position in the story of American racialization. (Cheng 23)

This ghostly position corresponds to the distanced assimilation I mentioned earlier and gives Asian Americans a distinctive vision of their racially melancholic past. Moreover, the dominant American white ideal also brings about the ghostly position of racialized Asian Americans because of its melancholically national, societal, and ideological “exclusion-yet-retention” of racialized others, including Asians and Africans.

And in protesting against the lacuna of Asian immigrants in American history, Chin also protests stridently on behalf of a larger Asian community in America, figured wittily in one of the poems in *Dwarf Bamboo* in terms of the fate of Chinese pandas in an American zoo: “We will not mate. We are / Not impotent, we are important. / We blame the environment, we blame the zoo!” (Chin 1987: 28) The elision of Asian Americans in the binary opposition of black⁸ and white, therefore, needs to be re-configured and replenished with the cultural heritage of Asian Americans so that Asian America is no longer exempt from historical discourse on racial melancholia. Chin’s work helps do just that.

⁸ Analysing the Euro-American psychological and historical imprints on African Americans, Anne Cheng draws upon several instances such as social psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s experiments—the famous “doll tests”—in the 1930s, Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, and landmark lawsuits like *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to introduce and emphasise Asian Americans’ psychic injury beyond Euro-Americans’ conception of black and white. (Cheng ix-x; 3-6)

Despite the black-and-white dyad, in which Asian Americans are absent, the historical ghostliness of Asian Americans has been enshrined in America's immigration laws, racist economic, social, and political policies to exclude and incorporate a particular imagining of racialized Asian American psyche. In the poem "A Chinaman's Chance," Chin invites the readers to witness the historical moment of the building of transcontinental railroads and to stand in the shoes of "a Chinese born in America" (Chin 1987: 29). "A Chinaman's Chance" focuses on the historical moment of the building of transcontinental railroads,⁹ which helped shape the experience of Chinese Americans and give it an inevitably melancholic tinge. She asks her readers in the first line to

⁹ According to the account of Sucheng Chan, professor of history and chair of the Asian American Studies Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in her book *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (1991b), "between 1867 and 1870, partly in response to recruitment efforts by the Central Pacific Railroad Company, which was building the western section of the first transcontinental railroad, some 40,000 Chinese poured into the country" (Chan 1991b: 28). She goes on, "The Union Pacific Railroad Company got the contract to build westward from the Missouri River, while the Central Pacific Railroad Company [...] was to build eastward from [Sacramento]. Unlike the Union Pacific, which could lay one mile of track a day across open plains using cheap Irish immigrant labor, the Central Pacific had to traverse several ranges of high mountains and had, moreover, to deal with the fact that California had the nation's highest wages. [...] Despite the scepticism that was expressed about their physical strength, Chinese soon became the backbone of the company's construction crews, providing the bulk of the labor not only for unskilled tasks but for highly demanding and dangerous ones as well. Regardless of the nature of the work they did, however, all Chinese were paid the same wage, which was considerably lower than what Euro-American skilled workers received. [...] the Chinese faced a huge rock outcrop called Cape Horn, around which no detour was possible. To carve a ledge on the rim of this granite bulk, Chinese were lowered by rope in wicker baskets from the top of cliffs. While thus dangled, they chiseled holes in the granite into which they stuffed black powder. Fellow workers pulled them up as the powder exploded. Those who did not make it up in time died in the explosions. As the road ascended into the high Sierras, it often took 300 men a month to clear and grub a bare three miles. [...] As the crew neared the crest of the mountain range, they began the almost impossible task of drilling a tunnel through solid granite. [...] Thousands of Chinese worked underground in snow tunnels around the clock through the winter of 1866. [...] As one of the Central Pacific's engineers admitted years later, 'a good many men' (i.e., Chinese) were lost during the terrible winter of 1867. The bodies of those buried by avalanches could not even be dug out until the following spring." (Chan 1991b: 30-31)

decide upon which philosopher to believe in: Plato or Confucius. Confucius, the greatest teacher and most exemplary wise man in Chinese history, says in the poem in a patriarchal tone that he is very happy about the birth of a male child, offering evidence of the emphasis on the realities of physical existence and on gender preference rather than the Platonic notion of spirituality. For Chinese labourers in America back in the nineteenth century, corporeal pain may have been one way to remind themselves of their goal of realizing the American dream, as suggested in the poem: “Your father was happy, he was charred by the sun” (29). Such Confucian ideas had a sweeping influence on shaping this realistic view on giving birth to male children for manpower.

In the poem Chin conjures up the tragic history of Chinese labourers in the United States working to build railways. It is worth mentioning that the poet draws upon the US idiom, “Chinaman’s chance,”¹⁰ an obviously derogatory and offensive slang referring to Chinese immigrants in the 1800s, to reveal how little a chance was for a Chinese labourer to survive under the most difficult circumstances. The poet Allen Ginsberg has also employed the

¹⁰ According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the definition of “Chinaman’s chance” is “slang, often offensive: the slightest or barest chance—usually used in negative constructions.” See URL: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Chinaman%27s%20chance>
The Free Dictionary has a more detailed denotation: “offensive slang: Little or no chance at all; a completely hopeless prospect. This derogatory phrase originated in the 1800s and referred to Chinese immigrants who worked for extremely low wages, faced racism and higher taxation, and were prohibited from testifying in court for violence committed against them. Primarily heard in US, South Africa.”
 See URL: <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/Chinaman%27s+chance>

phrase in his poem “America”: “Asia is rising against me. / I haven’t got a chinaman’s chance. / I’d better consider my national resources” (182).

Therefore, by entitling the poem “A Chinaman’s Chance,” Chin is not only arousing attention to the woeful history but also responding to her predecessor poet’s confessional soliloquy. Chin’s play on word can be observed in the historical facts that in the nineteenth century a Chinaman had little chance to rise, while in the twentieth century Asia, including China, was rising against America, in the aspects of economic growth and military power. Chin’s political echo and appropriation of Ginsberg’s phrase and line is evidently purposeful, bringing to attention this racist expression, which has remained in the country/the speaker, America, more than a century. In spite of the birth of a male child in the present, which should have led to rejoicing, we hear about the baby boy’s great-grandfather, who died a miserable death during railroad construction, taking us back to the doleful moment and grievous workplace of the Chinese labourers:

The railroad killed your great-grandfather.
His arms here, his legs there...
How can we remake ourselves in his image?

Your father worked his knuckles black,
So you might have pink cheeks. Your father

Burped you on the back; why must you water his face?

Your father was happy, he was charred by the sun,
Danced and sang until he died at twenty-one. (Chin 1987: 29)

Chin gives a graphic account of the life and tragic death of early Chinese working-class immigrants trapped by historical, economic, and political imperatives. She also uses a sense of family history to connect the past to the present. She employs empathy to invoke an awareness of collective Chinese American history in her readers, using the second person's voice "you" as though the casualties were their own father and great-grandfather. The poet excruciatingly inquires of the readers: "*How can we remake ourselves in his image?*" Remaking ourselves in the father's image, which stands for a history that "we" paradoxically want to disregard but cannot discard, would mean retrieving cultural traditions, whether good or bad. The melancholic ambivalence of Chinese labourers is thus represented in the impossible task of remaking the father's image, which posterity has to re-constitute from "his arms here, his legs there..." (29).

Early Chinese immigrants in nineteenth century America, as documented in history books, worked very hard and got their "knuckles black," so their children were able to have "pink cheeks" and grew strong and sturdy.

According to David Palumbo-Liu in his book *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (1999), the presence of early Chinese labourers and immigrants played a crucial role in the making of the modern socio-political and economical constitution of the U.S.:

The very vision of modern American time and space was enabled by Chinese labor on the transcontinental railroad, that concrete, modern technological link that, in a particular enactment of time/space compression, shrank the distance between the Atlantic seaboard and the Pacific coast and allowed America to imagine more precisely its particularly modern dream of an American Pacific 'lake.' (Palumbo-Liu 2-3).

In other words, though historical forces may have led to the absence of Asian Americans in legal and political discourse their presence helped construct American society and culture. Chin's poem speaks to just this paradox. The interplay of presence/absence and possession/loss has built up white racial melancholia towards Asian Americans in white American society as well as Asian Americans' own melancholic ambivalence about their historical position.

The melancholic ambivalence is embodied in the contrast of "black," so often associated with death, and "pink," which implies rosy bright vitality. The contrast of black and pink endows and impresses the readers with a sense

of the tough history of Chinese working-class diasporas. Fathers were happy when patting the babies “on the back” to burp but at the same time they were sad and crying because they were not able to watch their children grow up.

Here the poet rhymes “black” with “back” to represent the early Chinese labourers’ own plight and their regret and wish to look after their children.

Both “black” and “back” are thrown into prominence to reinforce the contrast between the Fathers’ wishes and the cruel conditions in which they had to live.

They have worked their knuckles “black” but could not be supportive at their children’s “back.” The tough situation, dying young at “twenty-one,” has become part of the tragic past that working-class Chinese immigrants shared, still alive in some sense in the present.

Moreover, the paired end-rhymes of “sun” and “twenty-one” stress the grim working conditions that led to their early death. In the poem, the sun, which may metaphorically refer to the decline of China,¹¹ the animosity of America, and ultimately “a gold coin at the horizon,” brings to early Chinese

¹¹ Chan explains why a massive number of Chinese emigrated overseas owing to the decline of the Ch’ing Dynasty Chinese authorities. Firstly, foreign aggression: “Great Britain led the Western powers in ‘opening’ China to trade and Christian proselytizing,” causing the war “known as the first Opium War (1839-42), which China lost. [...] English and French soldiers occupied Canton between 1858 and 1861. Their presence made it far easier for labor recruiters to lure peasant boys aboard foreign ships.” Secondly, civil convulsions: “Along with the widespread social, economic, and political dislocations caused by the presence of Westerners, domestic developments also created pressures for emigration. [...] the Taiping Rebellion—that swept through much of South and Central China, lasted more than a decade (1850-64), and resulted in an estimated 10 million deaths. [...] making life extremely precarious for the inhabitants in the region.” She then comments, “Emigration therefore became not just a means to a better life, but a lifeline.” (Chan 1991b: 7-8)

indentured labours hope, despair and even death. “He was charred by the sun” is a double anapaest, so both the image and the metre suggest we should read the line with a sense of ceremonial grief. The sorrowful atmosphere ironically shifts to a cheerful one at the turn of the succeeding line (“*Danced and sang until he died at twenty-one*”) because the next line literally and metrically, popping up with awkward trochaic feet, casts a jokey but satirical, elegiac light on the real working condition of Chinese workers as though they were singing and dancing in preparation for their own doom.

Actual circumstances have also resulted in the materialist point of view displayed by the poet as a gaze at something that is “not a sun but a gold coin at the horizon” (29), summoning fellow Chinese Americans to “*Chase after it, my friend, after it.*” Ostensibly the materialistic view of history is set to be in contrast to the metaphysical value of Western philosophy, but in fact the early Chinese labourers chose to do something for an article of faith and for a solid survival at the expense of their physical and spiritual lives regardless of their inferior status of being disfranchised politically and economically. In so doing the Chinese labourers manifest the inherently economic nature of Chinese American ethnicity. That is to say, their diligence and perseverance have contributed to the prosperity of the U.S. and eventually to their

successors' equal citizenship nearly a century later. The poet then inverts the otherized position of Chinese migrant workers and forges their enduring subjectivity. After all, the transcontinental transportation and economic development of modern America, after all, would not be so flourishing without those Chinese migrant workers.¹²

As the pronouns shift from “you” to “we” in the second half of the poem, Chin endeavours to unfold the history of more recent Chinese immigrants and to win identification from her readers: “We have come small and wooden, tanned brown / As oak pillars” (30). Xiaojing Zhou comments on the dismal conditions of comparable workmen: “Chinese men became cheap labor and their lives worthless in a country where their exploitation was justified because they were ‘Chinamen,’ the *racialized subordinate other*” (Zhou 2006: 82; emphasis mine). Having come through the most hazardous jobs, denial of citizenship and civil rights, and lots of hardship beyond contemporary

¹² In comparing Chinese contribution and what they gained in reward, Chan says, “Despite their heroic feat, the Chinese were not invited to the jubilant ceremonies that marked the completion of America’s first transcontinental railroad, hailed as one of the most remarkable engineering feats of its time.” She further illustrates how Chinese labourers’ participation in the making of transcontinental railroads changed the American history: “[I]t transformed the American West, especially California. Before its completion, California was geographically isolated from the rest of the country. Immigrants had to come by wagon train, while manufactured goods from the eastern United States arrived by ship around the tip of South America. The state’s exports—primarily wheat from the 1860s through the 1880s—traveld by the same long route to Atlantic seaboard and British ports” (Chan 1991b: 31). In order to redeem the Chinese immigrants of the time reciprocal attention, respect, and treatment based on their feats, people like Chan and Chin make efforts to elegize the history and let the melancholic mourning not cease.

readers' imagination, in Chin's poem they are represented as "tanned brown / as oak pillars." It seems that in that era a "Chinaman" got little "chance" to survive under such an abominable condition but to "peer straight / Through vinyl baggage and uprooted shoes" (30). Those "uprooted shoes" and "vinyl baggage" epitomize the rootless, mobile and insecure life of working-class Chinese expatriates earning a living in that historical context.

Without having a chance to return to the motherland, the displaced Chinese immigrants can only "gather [fathers'] leftovers: jimsons and velvets, / Crocuses which have burst-bloomed through walks" (30). Now that the body of the deceased has transformed into fertilizers of the land and flowers, overseas Chinese workers are imagined collecting flowers growing on the graves in memory of the forefathers. Perhaps gathering the flowers infers re-collecting fathers' "leftovers"/remains and conversing with fathers' spirits through their embodiment. However, the other contradicting voice in their heart urged them to "shatter this ancient marble, veined and glorious" (30). Though ambiguous, this may refer to the idea that by shattering the gravestone, they cut off their connections with the Chinese history. On the other hand, the shattered marble betokens the broken dream of family reunion as well as the broken American dream which resulted from the

dominant American society's racial exclusion and rejection of them. This process of frictional assimilation helps us comprehend grief and loss on the part of early Chinese immigrants as melancholic subjects who ambivalently acknowledge both racial affection and grief for the lost fathers, countries, and cultural heritage. This poem explores the possibilities of reinventing the racial melancholia, cultural otherness, and ghostliness of Chinese Americans shaped by historical forces, and rooting them squarely in social history.

Distanced Assimilation

Apart from historical forces, the traumatic imprints on Asian Americans deriving from white American institutional practices make both parties even more melancholic subjects and objects simultaneously. On the one hand, Asian immigrants' engagement is repudiated by means of legalized exclusion.¹³ On the other hand, white America's ideal of racializing others is sustained by its own "exclusion-yet-retention" toward Asians through legalization. The ghostly presence of Asian Americans has thus been formed

¹³ According to Chan's edited book on the Exclusion era, "Chinese immigration to the continental United States can be divided into four period: years of free immigration from 1849 to 1882; an age of exclusion from 1882 to 1943; a period of limited entry under special legislation from 1943 to 1965; and an era of renewed immigration from 1965 to the present. [...] During the exclusion years, only members of certain 'exempted classes'—merchants, students, diplomats, and travellers—could enter legally." (Chan 1991a: viii)

due to their melancholic response to the long and complex process of racial rejection and incorporation from the dominant white American society. As Chan observes,

the six decades of exclusion are the ‘dark ages’ of Chinese American history. That period is shadowy because we know so little about it; it is also dark because it was characterized by immense suffering and deprivation. Many forms of discrimination and violence hampered the existence of Chinese immigrants, as well as of their American-born children. Cut off from their homeland yet prevented by law from meaningful participation in American life, the Chinese struggled valiantly to create a microcosmic world of their own in the Chinatowns they established. (Chan 1991a: x)

This is very much the burden of Chin’s “A Chinaman’s Chance.” American racial melancholia on the part of either white or Asian Americans thus testifies the mental and physical dilemma and more importantly, functions as racial impetus to invigorate the interflow of ideological constructs.

The interflow of ideological constructs of both white and Asian Americans creates an “alternative site,” as Lowe terms, where “an element of indecidability, that is, as it at once implies both exclusion and inclusion, ‘Asian/American’ marks *both* the distinction installed between ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ *and* a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement” (Palumbo-Liu 1; italics original). This “Asian/American indecidability” indeed provided a

racial dynamic for the Chinese immigrants to build up Chinatowns, as in Chan's account, as a hypostatic and conceptual site to mediate between cultures and histories. We find an equivalent of this in Chin. For example, the speaker in "Barbarian Suite" speaks of complex cross-cultural experiences when she talks about American jazz and Buddhist scripture side by side: "I was under the covers with my barbarian boyfriend, / blowing smoke rings, talking jazz—'Posterity' / is yet another 'compromising position,' / addenda to the Kama Sutra" (Chin 1994: 23). Chin calls it a "compromising position," where "the further west we go, we'll hit east; / the deeper down we dig, we'll find China" (Chin 1994: 23, 17). As jazz was a distinctively black American art form, made by the posterity of transported slaves, so the poem plays with "barbarian" material (playing on the model of classical Greek othering), bringing her and her "barbarian" boyfriend together through different classic Asian texts ("Buddhist scriptures" and "the Kama Sutra"). Situating dislocated immigrants in America somewhere in-between the continents of Asia and America, she relocates herself and others in a "compromising position" to articulate and keep the complex, multi-dimensional immigrant histories in these continents exposed and remembered.

The poet also ingeniously associates the "compromising position," where

I argue “distanced assimilation,” with different metaphorical topographies. Good examples of this are the lines: “We are Americans now, we live in the tundra” (Chin 1987: 28) and “In this motherless desert heat / I am missing you. Welcome, sweet sojourner, / welcome to Chin’s promontory. / [...] a view of the freeway and the borderlands: / California’s best kept secret” (Chin 2002: 65). Both the bitter frigidness of the tundra and the scorching heat of the desert convey a sense of being displaced, “motherless” and excluded from the foreign land. The speaker, however, is still taking a stance on the “promontory,” where the ocean, signifying the motherly water, and the foreign land converge to reinvent a new form of Asian American subjectivity with fluid borderlands. And that “promontory” is exactly “where we live now,” as Chin entitles the poem. It is described as her promontory, however, a peripheral geographical site she names as her own place. In addition, the “Promontory,” as Michael Polk and Barbara L. Voss explicitly point out,¹⁴ refers to Promontory Summit, Utah, where the first transcontinental railroad of the U.S. was completed and where the Central Pacific Railroad and Union

¹⁴ According to Polk, “The first transcontinental railroad was completed at Promontory Summit, Utah, on 10 May 1869. Unique to this construction was the employment of thousands of ethnic Chinese railroad workers. The Promontory Mountains portion of the route had the largest concentration of railroad construction camps. Of 19 camps recorded during an inventory of the Golden Spike National Historic Site, four appear to be of Chinese ethnic origin” (59). Voss also narrates a historical fact, “On May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah, Leland Stanford used a silver maul to drive a ‘final’ golden spike that joined the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) and Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR), completing the first US transcontinental railroad” (287).

Pacific Railroad were joined. Voss described the junction of the two significant railroads as “materially and symbolically uniting a country that only years before had been torn apart by civil war” (287). Therefore, Chin is also playing on the word “promontory,” delineating where she stands as “a view of the freeway and the borderlands: / California’s best kept secret,” which hints at the Angel Island, the border checkpoint and detention barrack in the West Coast of the U.S. in the nineteenth century. “Chin’s promontory,” the “California’s best kept secret,” thus can be regarded as where the history of Chinese immigrants in America started, where the possibilities of Asian and American cultures began to amalgamate, and where Chinese labourers’ contribution to the completion of the transcontinental railroad should not be neglected. Chin utters the “California’s best kept secret” in a sarcastic tone because that miserable past of early Chinese workers was intentionally concealed until it was excavated in the mid-twentieth century. The poet hopes to get her own foothold by first giving credit to those early Chinese workers, who succeeded in joining the eastern and western halves of the U.S., and then by declaring to the readership with her poetry that she, who voices for the Asian American community, is a symbol of joined cultures and deserves a right to articulate.

“Where we live now” thus is a conceptual site for the poet in these poems to reflect on racial ambivalence whether in California or Louisiana. The poem “Exile’s Letter (Or: An Essay on Assimilation),” begins by saying “We are in Louisiana now / planting soy for an aristocrat / with a French name” (Chin 1987: 42), and in it Chin examines both Asian- and Euro-Americans’ racial melancholia in the “compromising position” of the post-Exclusion era. The title “Exile’s Letter” may refer to the poem with the same name translated by Ezra Pound from classical Chinese written by Li Po, one of the greatest Chinese poets in history. The reference to the Chinese poem with the same title suggests the connections between Chinese immigrants in America and their cultural heritage but also the American poet Ezra Pound. Despite the titles being the same, nonetheless, the two poems tell of different stories and psychic states of being an exile. The speaker in Pound’s version of Li Po’s “Exile’s Letter” narrates:

And then I was sent off to South Wai,
 smothered in laurel groves,
 And you to the north of Raku-hoku,
 Till we had nothing but thoughts and memories in common.
 And then, when separation had come to its worst,

and laments: “If you ask how I regret that parting: / It is like the flowers

falling at Spring's end / Confused, whirled in a tangle" (Pound 1977: 70, 72).

Using the fallen flowers "whirled in a tangle" as a metaphor for the exile's "confused" and chaotic mind, Pound's Li Po articulates the exquisite melancholy of leave-taking and parting from dear friends. Unlike Li Po's writing about the sadness and melancholy of parting due to political banishment, however, Chin's "Exile's Letter," with its sub-title "An Essay on Assimilation," focuses on the mourning of exiled Chinese immigrants in the U.S., and the relationship between exile, mourning and assimilation

This "exile's letter" is written and sent from "a distant cousin, circa 1964," and therefore dates from the post-Exclusion age. However, even though the Abolition and Exclusion Act had been rescinded by this date, working on the plantation for an aristocrat with a French surname suggests the continuity of the working life of Chinese immigrants and the poem explores their psychic ambivalence about assimilating into Euro-American society. On the other hand, in this instance the racial melancholia of "exclusion-yet-retention" of Chinese immigrants also works upon Euro-Americans, conscious of "the plight of the races":

Too bad that his wife, mad
and dying of cancer,

has offered him no children,
 an unjust retribution
 for a man so sure of his creed. (Chin 1987: 42)

Through the use of run-on lines, the poet focuses on the key word “mad” at line 11. She also insinuates the currency of racist views on Chinese immigrants in the humorous tribute to the former aristocrat: “Prévert; and no, / he’s not what his name suggests, / but rather, a stoic, truthful man” (42).

The seeming dependence on and homage to the aristocrat can be seen as strategic survival for Chinese immigrants to sustain their existence on the foreign land and to carry out their distanced assimilation at the alternative site. Besides, the setting is eerie because “One cool summer evening, / and the field alight with flies, / she came to us, whispering / “There were dogs here / who vanished in the deep of night, / prized setters and pointers, / well-groomed and with papers”” (42). The aristocrat’s mad wife came looking for her dogs and suspecting that the speaker and her family had devoured them: “I don’t believe you have erred / and have eaten ours as your own” (42).

Clearly this plays on the taboo on eating dogs in America and fear of Chinese eating them. Nevertheless, the fear of losing a loved object, the experience of profoundly painful dejection, and inhibition of normal activities overlap with the experiences of mourning and melancholia. The psychic process could be

understood in terms of the Freudian reading of melancholia: “The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it” (Freud 249-50). No matter whether anyone devoured the dogs or whether it is simply the mad woman’s imagination, it symbolizes the ego of the melancholic subjects, either Chinese immigrants or Euro-Americans, which has been consumed to identify with their counterpart, the lost object.

In the face of the “state,” the “cultivated wasteland,” that makes people melancholic, the grandmother of the speaker says, ““The dying are not unwise, / even the most dessicated¹⁵ cactus / issues a flower before death”” (43).

Both the oxymoron of “cultivated wasteland” and the alliteration of “dessicated” and “death” suggest the pessimistic view of Chinese immigrants’ marooned condition on the barren land while vitality is inherent at the “cultivated” alternative site. The sharp contrast between “cultivated” and “wasteland” implies Chinese immigrants’ tenacity inherited from their ancestors, embodied in the building of transcontinental railroads, and passed down through generations to the progeny now living in America. The source of the fear of assimilating to the American culture is then highlighted by

¹⁵ The spelling of “dessicated” is original in the poem.

means of a series of four alliterated words beginning with “b”: “And behind that briared fence / the boys are watching, even now, / the white boys” (43). The bombarding “b” sound works ominously with the last three lines of the poem leaving the readers in shock and fright, stimulating the readers to reflect on the distanced assimilation of these Chinese figures, and the melancholic ambivalence generated by the clash of two cultures.

Chin’s questioning of the identity of the Chinese immigrants foregrounds the vacillation between two spheres, where American topography is being transformed, and, as Chin states, “We study Western philosophy and explore our *raison d’être*. / All is well in the suburbs when we are in love with poetry” (Chin 1994: 22). For one thing, Chinese immigrants’ “*raison d’être*” can be constructed through philosophy but also poetry and poetry also offers an alternative site where Chinese immigrants can resist ideological oppressions from both cultures. For another, due to their distanced assimilation, Chinese immigrants experience the boundaries between the two cultural terrains as variable, giving rise to a volatile sense of transformation of the national topography of America. Chin displays how a problematic hybrid form of assimilation changes the American topography: “O crack an egg on the griddle, yellow will ooze into white” (Chin 2002: 13), skilfully metaphorizing a

daily life act of cooking an egg. The yellow oozing into white is suggestive of Chinese immigrants' distanced assimilation and the changed appearance of terrain features as well as the composition of population in the process of assimilating. Although Cheng claims, "the national topography of centrality and marginality legitimizes itself by retroactively positing the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation" (Cheng 10), I would argue that the centrality of white Americans and marginality of Chinese immigrants as racial other can be reversed like an egg on a griddle, where the egg yolk occupies the centre. In other words, in these poems Chin attempts to place Chinese immigrants and their distanced form of assimilation at the centre of American racial discourse.

Leaving the Work of Mourning Undone

Chin's attempt to make Asian America an alternative site, essential in redefining and re-delineating the borderlands between two cultural terrains, is purposeful and political, often turning racial grief and grievance into resistance. She describes herself in *The Phoenix Gone* as "another squatter in her own bamboo grove / minding her poetry—" (Chin 1994: 18), suggesting

that she is exploring how individual psyche of Asian Americans works in response to the loss of their loved cultural heritage. According to the OED, the word “squatter” is a *U.S.* word for “a settler having no formal or legal title to the land occupied by him,” but by appealing to the idea of “her own bamboo grove,” Chin creates a Chinese equivalent of Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own,” a female imaginative writing space. In Chin’s opinion, poetry is a great medium which endows the voiceless with voice, speaking about the psychic damage that propels their recalcitrant minds. In addition, by virtue of making the personal political, the work of collective mourning and memory of the larger racial community and tribe is invoked to resist overwhelming cultural assimilation. The collective memory is marked by a defiant refusal to forget, preventing the work of mourning from being overcome, a process Chin represents through the image of an “opened chasm”: “when one day heaven was unmerciful, / and a chasm opened where she stood” (18), something comparable to “an open wound,” in Freud’s disturbing trope, “emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished. It can easily prove resistant to the ego’s wish to sleep” (Freud 253).

The psychic injury of “an open wound” or such physical and psychic disorders as insomnia and anorexia are a form of resistance to normative

mourning over the lost object, as Chin points out in “The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty”: “Flesh remembers / what the mind resists” (Chin 1994: 47).

Chin writes about various individuals who suffer from psychic and physical disorder, and in doing so “offers a glimpse into the lives of those who cannot survive either the displacement or the acculturation” (Cucinella 2002: 57).

In an elegy for a girl named Chloe Nguyen who committed suicide, Chin writes of her resistant mindset and her resolute will to die:

a star fell—or was it a satellite
exploding into a bonfire at the horizon?
Chloe said, “This is how I want to die,
with a bang and not with a flicker.” (Chin 1994: 37).

With a dramatic bang, the girl manifests her resistance to acculturation in the most violent manner. Rather than eulogizing the merits of the deceased, the poet ironically praises her suicidal death:

Yes, Death is a beautiful man,
and the poor don’t need dowries to court him.
His grassy hand, his caliph—you thought you could master. (38)

The poet shows commiseration for “the poor” immigrants who find themselves unaccommodated in the land of America. They “don’t need

dowries to court Death” simply because “the beautiful man” will come to them on his own initiative under the circumstances of “the poor” immigrants’ vacuity of mind serving as an insatiable drive for death. “You thought you could master his caliph,” the poet laments over the wretched lot of this young Vietnamese immigrant girl, who was “bipedal in five months, trilingual in a year” probably because she was born to an affluent family, in which her father was “a professor of linguistics” and her mother took delight in baking French cakes (“petit fours”) (Chin 1994: 37). It is also worth noting that Chin uses the term for a Muslim ruler here, suggesting another kind of “foreign” other. Besides, by using the word “caliph,” the poet also intends to invoke the readers to think of the word “calligraphy,” which is often seen on the tombstones of Chinese or Asian deceased. Ironically, Chloe, who understood “the writing of the tombs” as well as “the slangs of the dead,” is now “eternally sophomore and soporific” (ibid.).

While stating Chloe Nguyen’s background of upbringing, the speaker compares hers to Nguyen’s at the same time, mentioning that her father ran a laundromat in Chinatown and her mother picked pears “for a self-made millionaire grower” (ibid.). The differences of social status and class between Nguyen’s and the speaker’s families make Chloe a

Friend of remote moribund languages!
 Chloe read Serbo-Croatian, the Latin of Horace.
 She understood Egyptian hieroglyphics, the writing of the tombs.
 The tongues of the living, the slangs of the dead—
 in learning she had no rival. (Chin 1994: 37)

But even so, that doesn't resolve the differences between an immigrant and a native, doesn't help someone like Chloe get acculturated in the U.S., and doesn't change her mind to be a successor of Death, either. In fact, Nguyen is one of the most common Vietnamese family names and by writing an elegy for a Vietnamese girl who found it difficult to assimilate to the American land and culture, the poet is making the personal political again and making it a common occurrence of the larger Asian community in America, in which displacement and acculturation are always the issues that immigrant people would have to address. One who strives to survive the displacement and acculturation like the speaker can proudly declare that he/she knows Death well:

This week I don't understand the lesson
 being a slow learner—except for the one about survival.
 And Death. I know him well...

He followed my grandfather as a puff of opium,

my father as a brand new car.
 Rowed the boat with my grandmother,
 blowing gales into my mother's ear.
 Wrapped his arms around my asthmatic sister,
 but his comforting never won us over. (Chin 1994: 38)

The speaker knows Death well because she was an eyewitness of the history of her family immigration when Death called upon several of her family time and again. The poet manages to create an atmosphere of Asian immigrants in America as a whole having a rough time bracing for “the astringency of modern death and bereavement” and other “vexed experiences” they have had in the course of assimilation.

As Ramazani explicitly points out, “the modern elegy is not a refuge for outworn nostalgias and consolations. The characteristic elegy of our time evinces the astringency of modern death and bereavement. [...] At its best, the modern elegy offers not a guide to “successful” mourning but a spur to rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world” (1994: ix).

Chin anthropomorphises Death with ingenuity so that “He” becomes a man who turns up around and brings troubles and distress to immigrants in particular. What the poet creates in this elegy definitely can be taken as a “spur to rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world”

because it represents the “astringency of modern death and bereavement.” A

coincidence as it may be, Both Chin and Ramazani presented their idea of modern elegy in the same year, one in the form of poetry and the other argumentation and theory, and that is to a certain extent of symbolic meaning. Such anti-consolatory codes create an irony that transcends the notion of redemption. In other words, in modern elegy like “Elegy for Chloe Nguyen,” “vexed experience” and “bereavement” are by no means a catharsis programme that can be uninstalled via a step-by-step template so that grief and mourning no longer exist in the mind of the living. On the contrary, modern elegists like Chin put more emphasis on anger, scepticism, conflict, anxiety, and vexation, in which the readers are made to be immersed to feel the same vexation and conflict as the bereaved do.

In addition to the case of Chloe Nguyen who commits suicide, which goes beyond normal elegiac pathos, some of the living also take anti-compensatory strategies such as self-impoverishment to expose the troublesome political issue of addressing what caused the loss of ego, identity, and cultural heritage. For instance, as Cucinella notes, “In ‘Disorder,’ Chin writes of a young woman starving herself in the land of plenty” (Cucinella 2002: 57). Addressing the patient, the poet affirms darkly that: “The only truth you know is your hunger / growing wider as the season darkens” (Chin 1994: 60). The poem “Gruel”

is based on the poet's personal experience when she was at Crestwood Psychiatric Hospital in 1983 and met a patient called Diana Toy (Chin 1994: 57). Chin worked as a "rehabilitation specialist" (Cucinella 2010: 141) who looked after Toy, and in the poem addresses her directly:

Your name is Diana Toy.
 And all you may have for breakfast is rice gruel.
 You can't spit it back into the cauldron for it would be unfilial.
 You can't ask for yam gruel for there is none.
 You can't hide it in the corner for it would surely be found,
 and then you would be served cold, stale rice gruel.

This is the philosophy of your tong:
 you, the child, must learn to understand the universe. (Chin 1994: 59)

Chin has narrated her intention to shape Diana Toy as an iconic figure in Moyers's interview, "Diana Toy is spiritually starved, which is what happens to many of us who appear on the shores of the promised land" (79). Not only a simply emotionally-disturbed girl, Toy is also presented as a representative of Asian immigrant females in America as a whole, people who have experienced physical hunger and psychic impoverishment in the process of assimilating to another culture. Besides, she is also subjugated to the patriarchal constraints of her own Chinese culture as she needs to be "filial" and comply with "the

philosophy of her tong” as expected. As a matter of fact, the poet speaks through the voice of the psychiatrist to a “you,” in the first instance Toy, but also to other individuals subordinate to the dominant regime on a more general level. She says: “Remember, what they deny you won’t hurt you. / What they spare you, you must make shine, / so shine, shine...” (59). Her consciousness of resistance is evidenced in the advice she offers to the “you.” So the food trope of gruel could possibly connote the poverty, the diluted mind (or, impoverished ego) of the melancholic subject, and a restorative supplement to the body and mind if “you” wish to be sustained while resisting melancholic racialization and “shining” in “the universe.”

Besides the gruel, other food tropes are used in Chin’s poems to indicate aspects of the spirituality of her world. The speaker in “The Floral Apron” recalls a lesson learned in her childhood through observation of the cooking six squid by “an elder of the tribe” from her “mother’s village”:

She wiped her hand on the apron,
pierced the blade into the first.
There was no resistance,
no blood, only cartilage
soft as a child’s nose. A last
iota of ink made us wince. (Chin 1994: 86)

The speaker is initially repelled by the sight of squid being butchered but there is a shift in her tone as the aroma of cooking food becomes increasingly enticing:

Suddenly the aroma of ginger and scallion fogged our senses,
and we absolved her for that moment's barbarism.
Then, she, an elder of the tribe,
without formal headdress, without elegance,
deigned to teach the younger
about the Asian plight. (86)

The speaker as a bystander thus learns a lesson about her cultural and culinary heritage from an elder instead of focusing on the unsavoury nature of necessary barbarism, somehow inherent in "the Asian plight." She continues:

And although we have traveled far
we would never forget that primal lesson
—on patience, courage, forbearance,
on how to love squid despite squid,
how to honor the village, the tribe,
that floral apron. (86)

Remembering the process of preparing the squid allows readers to detect the transformation in the speaker, who might be a second-generation immigrant

in a foreign land (someone at any rate who has “travelled far”). Moving from being initially horrified by something in her own cultural traditions to finding the wisdom in it, she finds that “lessons in endurance and courage from the Old World prove valuable in the new” (Snodgrass 107). As a result, the food preparation becomes a practical metaphor, in which different generational ideas are exchanged, turning the poem from a description of culinary practice into verse that takes on a larger community’s cultural and political significance (“the village, the tribe”), moving beyond personal experience to a pleasure in cultural solidarity.

There is also a collision of generational opinions about whether to hold onto one’s cultural heritage or not, but interestingly it is sometimes the younger generation of immigrants like Chin who want to preserve it.

Another poem set in a kitchen, “Turtle Soup” displays the tension between an Americanized speaker/daughter and her mother. Her mother is not interested in the turtle as a cultural symbol but only as a consumable nutrient for bodily sustenance, and boils and simmers the turtle while the daughter watches her cooking and says:

‘Ma, you’ve poached the symbol of long life;
that turtle lived four thousand years, swam

the Wei, up the Yellow, over the Yangtze.
 Witnessed the Bronze Age, the High Tang,
 grazed on splendid sericulture'
 (So, she boils the life out of him.)

'All our ancestors have been fools.
 Remember Uncle Wu who rode ten thousand miles
 to kill a famous Manchu and ended up
 with his head on a pole? Eat, child,
 its liver will make you strong.' (Chin 1994: 24)

The turtle is a cultural symbol of longevity as well as of Chinese heritage, which is here seen as fraught with historical epochs and the geographical landscapes of China, "but the irony of this turtle," according to Chin's interpretation, "is that it ends up in a swirl, in soup, in Pasadena, California" (Chin 1995: 77). Once devoured, the turtle, which I take to be an implicit symbol of the ego of Chinese Americans, becomes a lost object and perhaps representative of the psyche of the melancholic subject that is impoverished, and potentially cut off from "four thousand years" of Chinese history and culture. In an interview, talking about her early life, Chin said:

My grandmother used to carry me on her back and chant Chinese poems, Chinese songs and Chinese lullabies. Very early I heard poetry from the oral tradition. My grandmother was illiterate. She sang and spoke ancient poetry, thousands of years old.

Classical Chinese poetry was always in the heart and soul of the Chinese people. All Chinese students were forced to memorize and recite Chinese poetry. I believe that Chinese poetry is in the DNA. I'm the one who sort of carried that forth. (MacDonald, 2018)

In other words, she was acutely aware of ancient Chinese tradition, long-lived like the poem's turtle.

If this poem suggests that, despite her qualms, eating the turtle will make the child "strong," other poems address the question of hunger more directly. The speaker in another poem "Rhapsody in Plain Yellow" comments ironically on spiritual and physical hunger: "I am that yellow girl, that famished yellow girl / from the first world" (Chin 2002: 98). The sense of irony and the loss of the ego thus serve as an essential impetus to keep mourning in such poems inconsolable. So eating the turtle may suggest that an Asian immigrant in America is spiritually deprived but this may be, as Chin says, a sign of "the vicissitudes of the times" that "made her generation very practical" (Chin 1995: 77). It could also, however, be a sign that consuming the turtle is nourishing, aligned to a long Chinese culinary tradition of cooking turtles, and making turtle soup. That is to say, when the mother says "Sometimes you're the life, sometimes the sacrifice" (Chin 1994: 24), she knows very well about the ambivalence of keeping the cultural heritage or losing it. And that

ambivalence makes “her sobbing” “inconsolable” (24).

As a matter of fact, the voice of the poet figures throughout the poem as she addresses the speaker, the daughter, the reader, or Asian Americans of younger generation as “you.” Therefore, when the mother laments that “you” are “sometimes the sacrifice,” the pronoun may refer to the mother’s own sacrifice for the family as well as the children’s sacrifice of the cultural tradition as a price for assimilating to the new one. In fear of losing her cultural heritage, the poet asks, “Is there nothing left but the shell / and humanity’s strange inscriptions, / the songs, the rites, the oracles?” (24). “Humanity’s strange inscriptions” of course refer to ancient pictographs inscribed on turtles’ shells or walls and with the advancement of time these have evolved into the written characters we are using now. Written characters (the signifiers), however, according to the Derridean idea of *différance*, can never completely convey what they mean (the signified) but can only be defined with the help of other signifiers. In this way, the meaning of a signified is incessantly “deferred” and “differed” through an infinite chain of signifiers. The *différance* delivers a sense of discontentment and loss that can never be resolved and that corresponds to the anti-consolatory and anti-elegiac codes in the modern elegy. The anti-elegiac

dimension of this poem thus negates traditional aesthetic norms and radically subverts the conventional Chinese cultural ideology that has been underpinning the written characters. As Chin argues in a related context, she and other Asian immigrants hope to “preserve [their] past through food, and food also asserts [their] difference” (Chin 1995: 77) rather than celebrating an empty “shell” of cultural heritage without fully realizing and capturing the quintessence of it. Asian Americans’ melancholic ambivalence of attachment to and detachment from their cultural heritage is epitomised in Chin’s artful use of metonymy of a bowl of turtle soup (and “floral apron”).

Along with the allusions to eating and eating disorders there are references to the sleeping disorders associated with melancholia or depression. According to Freud, “The sleeplessness in melancholia testifies to the rigidity of the condition, the impossibility of effecting the general drawing-in of cathexes necessary for sleep” (Freud 253). We see such sleeplessness in the speaker in “Where We Live Now”:

Or will it be another sleepless night
 of Prozac and Yo-Yo Ma’s morbiferous cello?
 Alone, within you, without you,
 in the Southern California morass—
 arrogance, ignorance, indifference,
 wave after wave the clean hubbub of freeway

delivering me, delivering me
 from nowhere to nowhere, the landscape
 murmuring between waking and slumber. (Chin 2002: 59)

“Murmuring between waking and slumber” could become a loud protest if it occurred “wave after wave” and lasted for a long time. It is presumably kept under control by the drug “Prozac” she refers to, or by the music encapsulated in the Chinese American cellist Yo-Yo Ma’s “morbiferous cello,” a cello that is simultaneously pathogenic and therapeutic. Nevertheless, her sleeplessness delivers the speaker in her “Southern California morass” into a kind of “nowhere,” a “freeway” which acts as a liminal no-place, caught between “waking and slumber.”

Such melancholia and suffering experienced between “waking and slumber” as well as psychical depletion allow the poet to sing her “Blues on Yellow” about her aspirations for “the promised land” that her mother and other immigrant fellows will reach one day:

Do not be afraid to perish, my mother, Buddha’s compassion is nigh.
 Do not be afraid to perish, my mother, Buddha’s compassion is nigh.
 Your babies will reach the promised land, the stars will be their guide.

I am so mellow yellow, mellow yellow, Buddha sings in my veins.
 I am so mellow yellow, mellow yellow, Buddha sings in my veins.
 O take me to the land of the unborn, there’s no life on earth

without pain. (Chin 2002: 13)

If the repetitive form suggests the great black American tradition of the Blues, with roots in the Gospel's "promised land," the mention of the Buddha and the rich colours of Oriental religion indicates the speaker's "mellow yellow" identity. So to reach the Nirvana of the "unreborn," where there is no Buddhist transmigration of birth and death, pain and sin, the speaker and her "yellow" fellows need to be "not afraid to perish." We can read this as a typically melancholic protest, a resolutely anti-elegiac posture which insists on painful continuity of cultural history and memory.

The very first sentence of "Blues on Yellow," the opening poem of *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (2002), establishes a plaintive mood, enhanced by the use of "die" and "lost." It reads as a threnody mourning the death of early Chinese labourers in America: "The canary died in the gold mine, her dreams got lost in the sieve" (13). The gold mine and the sieve are easily associated with the feverish migration of workers during "The Gold Rush"¹⁶ exploring to

¹⁶ "In 1852 [...] more than 20,000 Chinese passed through the San Francisco Customs House en route to the gold fields in the Sierra Nevada foothills. [...] For the next decade, arrivals in California fluctuated between 2,000 and 9,000 a year. [...] The singular importance of gold to the early immigrants in California is reflected in the folk memory of many Chinese around the world to this day: until quite recently, they called San Francisco Jiu Jin Shan (Gaogamsan, 'the Old Gold Mountain'), while Australia is known as Xin Jin Shan (Sungamsan, 'the New Gold Mountain'). A few statistics will also illustrate the significance of gold in Chinese American history. The 1860 census takers found that virtually 100 percent of the Chinese in the continental United States were still living in California. The state continued to hold a majority of the nation's Chinese population until the turn of the century: 78, 71, 67, and 51 percent of them lived in California in 1870, 1880, 1890, and 1900, respectively. Within the

make a fortune in the nineteenth century in the United States. There were also loads of other Chinese labourers sent to the construction sites of railroads in America, as the speaker sings, “Her husband the crow killed under the railroad, the spokes hath shorn his wings” (13). The canary, a figurative image for Chinese forebears because of their yellow feathers, and the crow, who got charred due to toils under the sun, are thereby the miserable main subjects in the first stanza of the blue tune. The blues form, in addition, sets up an equation between immigrant Chinese and black Americans, with their music of protest and lamentation.

The rhythmic movement of the lines, however, conveys an uncannily brisk sense as in a nursery rhyme, playing with “Sing a Song of Sixpence” and converting its lyric “Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie” into “Something’s cookin’ in Chin’s kitchen, ten thousand yellow-bellied sapsuckers baked in a pie” (13), bemoaning “the Asian plight” symbolized by the canary, the crow, the sapsucker, and even the squid as well as the turtle (Chin 1994: 86). While the second line of each stanza, being a repetition of the first one, emphasizes the mournful, fearful, and confrontational sense of

state itself, 84, 45, 32, 13, and 12 percent of them were found in the mining counties in 1860, 1870, 1880, 1890, and 1900, respectively. Unlike the independent white prospectors, most of whom had left the mining regions by the late 1850s, sizable numbers of Chinese remained there until the 1880s.” (Chan 1991b: 28)

it, the tonal device makes the poem itself a comical and witty representation of identity politics in blues form. The triplet stanzas further make the poem an enthralling blues in which the readers can follow the tune and sense the profound protest of people identified by their yellow skins:

O crack an egg on the griddle, yellow will ooze into white.
 O crack an egg on the griddle, yellow will ooze into white.
 Run, run, sweet little Puritan, yellow will ooze into white.

If you cut my yellow wrists, I'll teach my yellow toes to write.
 If you cut my yellow wrists, I'll teach my yellow toes to write.
 If you cut my yellow fists, I'll teach my yellow feet to fight.

(Chin 2002: 13)

The metrical rhythm and the strong end rhyme enable the reader to grasp the spirit of the blues. With the stressed words standing out regularly and naturally, the lines, despite their mixture of different prosody and metrics, flow in a clear and unimpeded way. This unique fusion of grievance and gaiety, death pall and jocund ambiance evokes a contradictory ideology, which is both playful and painful. The metaphoric density of Chin's rich use of an "egg" manifests the confrontational tactics in full measure. The desire of the yellow to assimilate to white culture and the white rejection yet attachment to the yellow are dramatized here in such a daily life activity as frying an egg in a

pan. The clash between yellow and white has also gone wild in the speaker's mind when she is so intimidated to be maimed and says, "If you cut my yellow wrists [...] / If you cut my yellow fists."¹⁷ The poet undoubtedly endows this triplet with a sense of insistence and resistance against "malevolent, massive institutional force" (Kelly, 2012) by showing the speaker's determination to "teach [her] yellow toes to write" and to "teach [her] yellow feet to fight."

In addition to her resolution here of "teaching her yellow feet to fight" and "not being afraid to perish," in another poem Chin even writes her own epitaph, playing metaphorically on her own death in a kind of self-elegy. I suggest she is using herself here as a case of assimilation, a hybrid identity comparable to that articulated in "How I Got That Name: An Essay on Assimilation." In that poem she asserts herself as:

¹⁷ In an article about the man who killed 77 people in Norway in July 2011, Jon Kelly investigates the man's gesture of holding a clenched fist when he appeared in court. Kelly brings up the history and meaning of the gesture "as a symbol of defiance and solidarity, commonly associated with both left-wing politics as well as the struggles of oppressed groups. [...] In turn, it was incorporated into the symbolism of a range of radical groups. These included the feminist movement, whose image of a fist inside the female gender symbol was popularised during protests against the Miss America Beauty pageant. [...] During the 1960s, the black power salute emerged from militant offshoots of the US struggle for civil rights and groups like the Black Panther Party. Its use during the 1968 Olympics was seen as a nod to black power, although Tommie Smith insisted in his autobiography that he saw it as a 'human rights salute'. [...] Equally, however, the raised fist has come to be seen as a signifier of individual as well as collective defiance - as witnessed when Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990. [...] For psychologist Oliver James, author of *Affluenza*, the clenched fist has proved such a powerful symbol because it encapsulates connotations of resistance, solidarity, pride and militancy in one simple gesture. [...] 'It's a way of indicating that you intend to meet malevolent, massive institutional force with force of your own - you are an individual who feels bound with other individuals to fight an oppressive status quo,' James says" (Kelly). In this regard, Chin's intentional use of the image of clenched fist definitely conveys the sense of defiance, solidarity, and protest of the oppressed Asian Americans who wish to fight against the white American domination.

neither black nor white,
 neither cherished nor vanquished,
 just another squatter in her own bamboo grove
 minding her poetry—
 when one day heaven was unmerciful,
 and a chasm opened where she stood.
 Like the jowls of a mighty white whale,
 or the jaws of a metaphysical Godzilla,
 it swallowed her whole.
 She did not flinch nor writhe,
 nor fret about the afterlife,
 but stayed! Solid as wood, happily
 a little gnawed, tattered, mesmerized
 by all that was lavished upon her
 and all that was taken away! (Chin 1994: 18)

Seeking to “squat” on an alternative cultural site, the “opened chasm,” Chin attempts to struggle and survive between black and white, between the devouring of Moby-Dick of the American West and the Godzilla of the East. In her poetry, she is able to form a “solid” subjectivity as an Asian American in spite of monolithic ideologies and the characterizations “lavished upon her” from both Chinese and American cultures as well as “the sacrifice” of cultural heritage. But then she is represented as being “a little gnawed, tattered” and scathed. If the poem imagines being “swallowed” whole, like Jonah, or the figure who is imagined perishing in “Blues on Yellow,” it also insists on and affirms survival.

The poem's imaginary record of the epitaph on her tomb reads: "Here lies Marilyn Mei Ling Chin" (18), a reprise of the very first line of the poem: "I am Marilyn Mei Ling Chin" (16), a powerful and Whitmanesque opening comparable to that of "Song of Myself": "I celebrate myself, and sing myself" (Whitman 26). However, the poem records how Chin's nominal identity changed through the transliteration of her Chinese name into an English one:

the name had been changed
somewhere between Angel Island and the sea,
when my father the paperson
in the late 1950s
obsessed with a bombshell blonde
transliterated 'Mei Ling' to 'Marilyn.' (Chin 1994: 16)

Therefore, by announcing "I" am Marilyn Mei Ling Chin, she claims both her new hybrid identity and the history that signifies her differentiation from early Chinese immigrants who had to pass the Customs House on Angel Island to enter the United States and also her connexion to them: "Oh, how I love the resoluteness / of that first person singular / followed by that stalwart indicative / of 'be,' without the uncertain i-n-g / of 'becoming'" (16). The "stalwart" renaming seems to sustain her assimilation to the foreign host culture. However, what really lies behind the renaming is her accusation

against her father's "initial impulse," which "nobody dared question" (16).

Her renaming demonstrates what John Gery calls "the grotesque inappropriateness of her own name" (Gery 36) as she was "named after some tragic white woman / swollen with gin and Nembutal. / My mother couldn't pronounce the 'r.' / She dubbed me 'Numba one female offshoot'" (16). The poet's satirical voice in the exposure of her personal history is political and aims to satirise her father's incompetency: "a tomcat in Hong Kong trash— / a gambler, a petty thug, / who bought a chain of chopsuey joints / in Piss River, Oregon, / with bootlooged Gucci cash." She represents him as the embodiment of Chinese-style patriarchal arbitrariness: "Nobody dared question his integrity given / his nice, devout daughters / and his bright, industrious sons / as if filial piety were the standard /by which all earthly men were measured" (16-17). The history of her renaming in reference to America and Hong Kong undercuts her assimilation and relation to the American society.

Chin continues to parody the stereotype of Chinese immigrants imprinted on the ego of the white American mindset while inverting it:

How we've managed to fool the experts
in education, statistics and demography—

We're not very creative but not adverse to rote-learning.
 Indeed, they can *use* us.
 But the 'Model Minority' is a tease.
 We know you are watching now,
 so we refuse to give you any! (Chin 1994: 17)

The italicization of “use” highlights Euro-Americans’ envisioning of Asian Americans as models of adaptation and subjugation. By the use of “fool” and “tease,” the poet elevates Asian Americans to a level categorized as (like the poet being elegised) “neither black nor white,” and where they build themselves up with resistance and develop a particular Asian Americanness without tallying with either “filial piety” or Euro-Americans’ expectations. Besides, the poet also summons Chinese Americans who have renounced their cultural heritage and assimilated to American popular culture. She reflects ironically on the fact that though recent generation of immigrants do not appreciate William Carlos Williams’s American poetics, they respond to a handsome lad in a soap opera series:

Oh, bamboo shoots, bamboo shoots!
 The further west we go, we’ll hit east;
 the deeper down we dig, we’ll find China.
 History has turned its stomach
 on a black polluted beach—
 where life doesn’t hinge
 on that red, red wheelbarrow,

but whether or not our new lover
 in the final episode of “Santa Barbara”
 will lean over a scented candle
 and call us a ‘bitch.’
 Oh God, where have we gone wrong?
 We have no inner resources! (Chin 1994: 17)

Incorporating references to both Chinese and American cultural symbols, Chin attempts to negotiate the idea of assimilation as a form of distanced assimilation, where Chinese Americans actually occupy or forge an alternative cultural site between East and West, assimilating inevitably to the dominant American culture while keeping in touch with their Chinese selfhood. By virtue of a bitter invocation to God and to John Berryman (who in his *Dream Songs* quotes his mother saying “Ever to confess you’re bored / means you have / no Inner Resources”), Chin not only addresses Chinese Americans but also white Americans, asserting that “life is boring” if both of the parties keep working to fulfil the stereotype of assimilation. The idea of the “model minority,” after all, is itself a hoax. Just as Berryman claims, “I conclude now I have no / inner resources, because I am heavy bored” (16), the speaker in “How I Got That Name” shouts out and responds to her own question: “We have no inner resources!” Having no “inner resources” would finally lead to a complete emptiness of the ego, confirming racial melancholia on both sides.

Following her ironic lament about having no “inner resources,” Chin shapes a self-portrait of herself (and others like her) as Chinese Americans through the vision of a deceased forefather: “the Great Patriarch Chin / peered down from his kiosk in heaven / and saw that his descendants were ugly” (17). At this point the self-portrait takes on the form of Berryman-like self-mockery when she describes the patriarch’s descendants:

One had a squarish head and a nose without a bridge.
 Another’s profile—long and knobbed as a gourd.
 A third, the sad, brutish one
 may never, never marry.
 And I, his least favorite—
 ‘not quite boiled, not quite cooked.’ (Chin 1994: 17)

We could surely read this as symptomatic of Freudian “self-denigration,” an expression of a reproach directed not to the speaker and her family members but to their lost loved object—their cultural heritage and self. Or, we could read it as a sign of their necessary distance from the ancestral figure.

In 2018, Chin published a book of new and selected poems entitled *A Portrait of the Self as Nation*, bringing together poems from 30 years under its defiant Whitman-like title. Interviewed about it in *The Margins* that year, she said:

...as an immigrant poet, I wanted to build a diasporic Asian American aesthetics. There were not many models before my generation. I have been patiently working on these “bicultural” forms and variations. I believe that through cross-pollination, we’ll get innovation. That’s the pioneering immigrant spirit. We are building the railroad! Thousands of us in sweatshops help “create” American civilization but we don’t often get the credit for it. (Jane Wong, 2018)

She also, however, insisted on her rebellious, feminist agenda, played out in dialogue with both American and Asian cultural traditions (“It’s no fun if you don’t piss off and embarrass your ancestors”), and declared how she sought to embrace:

...oppositional ancient and living voices that merge together in my writing: I wanted to hijack the traditions, mix it up, and “make it new” but with a long shadow of the Pacific Rim all over it and a big dose of social and feminist critique. (ibid.)

That “feminist critique” is an essential element in her always gendered, always critical, and self-conscious poems, where the personal is indeed the political, and the political is given an extraordinary personal twist.

If “How I Got That Name: An Essay on Assimilation” is an often ironic elegy for herself, it also ultimately embraces the contradictions of her hybrid

or hyphenated identity at its defiant end. In such poems melancholic ambivalence about what is “lavished upon her” and “what is taken away” will keep functioning as an impetus to support “the resoluteness / of that first person singular” in this alternative cultural site—an Asian America—and indeed, to leave the work of mourning for a lost cultural heritage unaccomplished, and a new mixed cultural identity being worked out in her poetry.

Chapter 2
“Your otherness is perfect as my death”:
Li-Young Lee’s Elegiac Vision and Family Narratives
of Displacement

One of the inevitable questions that Li-Young Lee often encounters in interviews and conversations is people’s concern about his ethnic identity and whether he aligns himself with other Asian American peer poets. Looking back from his birth in Jakarta, Indonesia, we witness in his writing a rich and complex modern history of an Asian exile traveling between the East and the West. Born to Chinese parents, he maintains: “I am adamant about insisting that [...] I’m Chinese” (Lee 1995b: 256). This is his answer to Moyer’s very first question in the interview, an assertion many people would and do doubt. At other times he has given an answer that might go beyond the inquirer’s expectations: “I feel great kinship with South American poets, and in fact sometimes I feel even more kinship to European poets than South American poets” (Lee 2000a: 89). It seems more often than not listeners and readers of his interviews would find it hard to trace his thinking route, since he has leaping thoughts and often plays the game against the rules. Yet deep in his heart Lee clearly finds something essentially contradictory about his identity when he is asked such questions over and over again: “[A]ll of my work is

about destiny and interrogates that very question. [...] There is something in me that is absolutely American, absolutely assimilated, and there is something in me that is very resistant to assimilation” (Lee 2000a: 83). Although ethnic identity is not the main concern in his poems and he keeps evading questions relevant to that, asserting that his responsibility as a poet does not involve fulfilling others’ cultural expectation, there is an obvious inner struggle whenever it comes to his personal and familial history of migrating.

Lee and his family’s stories of migration are a manifestation of commotion and dislocation in the twentieth century. Because Lee’s maternal great-grandfather was the first President of the Republic of China, Yuan Shikai, and his father was the former personal physician to the head of the Chinese communist party Mao Tse-tung, the Lees were destined to participate in the grandeur of royal life and subsequently a difficult and vagrant life after political trends changed and they fell out of favour. Having been through the *fin de siècle*, the political shift from monarchy to democracy, and the thorough devastation of historical survivals during the Cultural Revolution, the Lee family was marked by vicissitudes and endowed with the gene of displacement. Half a century after leaving the country, Lee’s mother, Jiaying, decided to go back to her homestead, where there used to be an array

of mansions and halls, and found it was turned into a graveyard, a pig farm, a hospital and public parks (Lee 1995a: 31; 1995b: 265). Lee records that the gravekeeper, a loyal servant of the Yuan family, still recognized Jiaying and he knelt down bowing to her and addressed her in a respectful manner. He recounted how the grave was dug up by a group of student revolutionaries, who then dragged the corpses of her father and grandmother and tied them naked to a tree (Lee 1995a: 30-31). Witnessing the shocking sight/site with his mother, Lee records his deep sense of sadness: “In my most pessimistic moods I feel that [...] I’ll never have any place that I can call home. [...] I don’t feel nostalgic because I don’t know what to feel nostalgic *for*. It’s simply a feeling of disconnection and dislocation” (Lee 1995b: 258; italic original).

He further explains his sense of disconnection and dislocation by saying: “[I]f I go to Europe I would feel as if I’m going to look at somebody *else’s* ruins, and if I go to China I’d *also* be looking at somebody else’s ruins. I have the feeling I need to get back to Indonesia and yet, I don’t know what I would look for there either. I’m not sure what I am supposed to look for anywhere” (Lee 1995b: 265; italics original). Here he observes that he feels an affinity with his ancestral kindred while at the same time he feels alien to “somebody

else's ruins," and says he was presumed not to be one of the locals judging from the way he walked, talked, or dressed. Years later when Lee's wife, Donna, renovated their house, Lee records that he simply couldn't bear the idea that he lived a life of his own, saying "I couldn't get used to the idea that I owned anything; it seemed very strange to me. [...] I don't recognize this life; I don't like it. I don't want to live this life. [...] It didn't feel comfortable to me to know I owned a couch or a house" (Lee 2000a: 87). Having got used to travelling on ships, living in other people's houses, and staying in places like churches or shelters for refugees, Lee could not get used to the new windows replaced by Donna since when they first moved into the house the windows were broken. Despite his insistence that where he came from has not always been crucial in his mind, Lee's sense of displacement definitely contributes to his unique idea of poetry.

Pointing out that Lee had "reacted strongly against being pigeonholed as an Asian-American writer," Tod Marshall discusses Lee's comments about the generalised categorisation of his ethnic identity in terms of his skin colour (Lee 2000b: 131). Lee explains:

The fine print of that question—"Where do you stand as an Asian-American writer"—is a question about one's dialogue with cultural

significance. I would say the answer is nil; I have no dialogue with cultural existence. Culture made that up—Asian-American, African American, whatever. I have no interest in that. I have an interest in spiritual lineage connected to poetry—through Eliot, Donne, Lorca, Tu Fu, Neruda, David the Psalmist. But I’ve realized that that is still the culture. Somehow an artist has to discover a dialogue that is so essential to his being, to his self, that it is no longer cultural or canonical, but a dialogue with his truest self. His most naked spirit. (Lee 2000b: 132)

Lee’s answer fundamentally resists all the terms of the question, and in doing so, calls into question most of the assumptions about “Asian American” literary identity. For him, writing poetry involves an inner dialogue with his “truest self” and an exploration of what is “essential to his being” rather than anything to do with his physical or sociological existence. Lee develops his idiosyncratic theories of artistic creation in terms of “spiritual lineage” but not “cultural existence.” Apparently the question whether he is an Asian American writer or not makes no sense to him. In this sense we might observe that his views are in stark contrast to a poet like Marilyn Chin, for whom her specific Asian American formation is crucial to her identity and poetics. What he devotes himself to, instead, is unfolding the manifold significance of life through the manifold quality of poetic speech. According to Lee:

I believe poetry's work is to uncover a genuine or authentic human identity, an identity even prior to childhood. It's like the Zen question: What was your face before you were born? I think poetry tries to answer that. [...] Poetic speech is so dense because it accounts for the manifold quality of our being. There are many selves in me. [...] Poetry accounts for the many-ness of who we are. (Lee 2000a: 83)

For him the manifold significance lies in the context of everyday life; everything is poetic language to him: birds are language, trees are language, while even bed-sheets in the absence of the body after getting up every morning are brimming with pathos (Lee 2010). What the poet sees is a cipher-ridden world, in which there is a natural law supporting, guiding, and directing the operation of all things in the universe. That law, which Lee terms Logos, God, or Tao, "finds embodiment in poetry" (Lee 2000b: 135). He elaborates the concept of Logos, saying that the laws that govern all things in the universe "are the very laws that poetry reveals in rhyme, recurring motif, dramatic fruition, inevitable circumstances of sound and image" (ibid.). In other words, poetic language serves as a medium linking us to an invisible world which is more real than the visible world due to the Logos; according to Lee, what is more, "poetry is the highest form of yoga we can do" (Lee 2003/2004: 605). For Lee poetry is "yogic" because it "yokes" our physical presence within a larger presence, where we have manifold presence, which

reveals our truest self.

Lee's views of poetry, poetics and cultural identity set him apart from the terms of reference of most influential contemporary theorists, whose social and cultural argument about migrant, multi-cultural, hybrid, or nomadic paradigms he seems determined to evade. Nevertheless, we could see him as constructing an idiosyncratic, heterodox version of an alternative subjective and/or aesthetic space, not unlike that conjured in Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, where he argues that:

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

Though Lee would presumably not recognise the fact, his work might be seen as operating in a version of Bhabha's "in-between" spaces that call into question the dominant cultural and national binaries and norms of the society he lives and writes in. Bhabha's attempts to articulate the notions of culture played out in late twentieth-century modernity (or post-modernity) offer a

different view of Lee's determinedly resistant poetics.

Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an 'in-between' temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history. This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge, which like the coloured South African subject represents a hybridity, a difference 'within', a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality. And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive 'image' at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world. (Bhabha 19)

Bhabha's notions of "the aesthetics of distance" and of "interstitial space" offer a different theoretical take on Lee's determinedly personal and subjective declarations about his poetry and its relationship to his cultural history.

While respecting Bhabha's views, however, it would be wrong to let them override Lee's own formulations about what drives and informs his work, with its own versions of "stillness of time and a strangeness of framing."

Such a poetic stance is fundamentally religious or metaphysical, rather than political like Chin's, or invested in "the location of culture" like Bhabha's. His investment in ideas of the "Tao" and "yoga," which has a definite Asian

genealogy, as well as the Greco-Christian “Logos,” suggests a trans-cultural notion of the metaphysical. Moreover, our manifold presence in the invisible world, for Lee, includes death. In one of his interviews Lee recalls that his first painting teacher asked him to look at the beauty of things, such as a flock of wild geese flying overhead and honking, through the lens of his own death. Then he realizes by looking at the beauty through his own death things would become “momentous, mystic” (Lee 1999: 108). In order to understand his sense of death, we need to comprehend another idea he elaborates.

Borrowing from theoretical physics Lee tells his readers that “material reality is vibration” (Lee 2000b: 143). He develops this concept further when he argues that “every leaf is a word. A word is a vibration. A leaf is a vibration” (ibid.). Thus, to make sense of death, he argues, one needs to figure out that vibration as “your body reads it” (ibid.). Likewise, by means of poetic words, the medium we use to reach the complete presence beyond the visible world, we get to “make the silence palpable” and open up “pregnant silence” (Lee 1999: 106).

In brief, for Lee in his interviews, poetry, as a form of art, uncovers death, silence, space and so on as forms of our manifold being and he aims to probe into this pregnant presence and explore the figure who has most influenced

him all his life—his father. If in this, he shares something of the elegiac sense of family that pervades Marilyn Chin's work, he approaches it in a profoundly different spirit that is shaped by the distinctive metaphysical preoccupations revealed in his interviews and poems.

Poetic Reconstruction of the Father Figure

We can trace the enormous influence of the father figure on the psyche of Lee as the explicit speaker in the poems throughout his poetic works. Just as the figure of the mother is so central to Chin's poetic project, the father is in Lee. Both poets work through their complex relationship to culture and identity in relation to representations of their parents. The images of the father figure, which are portrayed in detail, demonstrate Lee's belief that every person has manifold presence in the visible world and beyond. In front of his children Lee's father oftentimes appears to have been a very austere, dogmatic, and stern man of authority but nevertheless his tenderness sometimes showed itself in trivial aspects of everyday life and concern. The huge front that his father put up is "a serious man who devised complex systems of numbers and / rhymes / to aid him in remembering, a man who forgot nothing," Lee writes

in the poem “Mnemonic” (Lee 1986: 66), which ignites his own and people’s imagination of the father figure and portrays the “success” of remembering a memory that used to be repressed. Lee depicts with subtle detail how his father succeeded in playing the role of a father who taught his children the importance of “remembering” their ethnic history as well as the importance of learning mathematics and literature. Yet tensions are commonly found in the father-son relationships when a father is a demanding one, who is keen to see his children do better. Lee, though wary of expressing such ambivalence, is inevitably caught up in these. Lee’s father seems to have been a father not used to give verbal praise, and even worse, Lee says “my father would be ashamed of me” (ibid.).

The father-son tension persists when Lee tries to retort: “Not because I’m forgetful, / but because there is no order / to my memory, a heap / of details, uncatalogued, illogical” (Lee 1986: 66). Lee communicates with his God-like father through recollection and he knows well that he has to bear the weight of his father’s expectations, so he needs something “ordered, catalogued, and logical” to assist him in remembering. Hence a sweater that belongs to his father is a signpost in the massive map of Lee’s memory and also an overlap in the memory of his father’s. Lee recalls this in “Mnemonic,” stressing how he

values the memory of his father showing his paternal love:

I was cold once. So my father took off his blue sweater.
 He wrapped me in it, and I never gave it back.
 It is the sweater he wore to America,
 this one, which I've grown into, whose sleeves are too long,
 whose elbows have thinned, who outlives its rightful owner.
 Flamboyant blue in daylight, poor blue by daylight,
 it is black in the folds. (ibid.)

The poem makes the gift of the sweater the focus of his father's legacy to him.

On top of being a token of his father's love I suggest the sweater is also a

symbol of a Chinese father's expectations¹⁸ for his children that they "wear"

¹⁸ An article whose headline "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior" has received wide attention since its publication in the *Wall Street Journal* in January 2011. Soon after that the author of that article, Amy Chua, Professor of Law at Yale Law School, published a book entitled *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011). Because of the fact that Chua was born to Chinese parents who emigrated from Philippines in the United States, she writes about the learning experiences that she grew up with and those disciplines she used to raise and educate her children. Both the article and the book contain messages about teaching children in a severe, what's more, even dictatorial manner, resulting in a huge reverberation, both positive and negative, from the readers. For example, the "tiger mom" talks about how she applies "the conventional Chinese methods" in disciplining and demanding her children to learn how to play the piano and the violin, which are both considered the best musical instruments for children by their Chinese parents. In brief, the idea of "the conventional Chinese ways of teaching" is demanding and involves high expectations. Besides, in traditional Chinese parents' point of view, children's educational background matters and the top priority of future career could be doctor, attorney, professor, and so forth. This educational style, of course, appears to be unbelievable, or even insane, to most of the American parents, or Western parents, who pay more attention to a much more democratic education. However, Chua's controversial book becomes a bestseller owing to the soar in the economic and political status of China over the past two decades. More and more prominent people who take important positions in the government or enterprises are born of Chinese descent. If *The Tiger Mother* had been published earlier in the nineteen-seventies, when it was still the initial stage of Asian American literature and culture, it would have been just a laughingstock; or even worse, not published at all. So what I would like to point out here is that Lee's father is supposed to be a conventional Chinese "tiger father" in terms of educating children due to his classical Chinese education and upbringing. As a consequence, in the poem when Lee writes that his father took off his sweater and wrapped Lee in it, I would suggest it is a symbol not only of his father's tenderness but also his demanding expectations for Lee.

classical Chinese learning and retain their cultural heritage, no matter where they are. “It is the sweater he wore to America” and it is also the hereditary treasure that a father, “its rightful owner,” hands down to his offspring. It is comparable to the “turtle soup” and “floral apron” in Chin, which I describe as both symbols of maternal inheritance and cultural memory. However, the fact that the “sleeves are too long” might also suggest that this paternal love the speaker receives is too much a burden for him. The sweater thus works not only as an icon of an adult speaker’s fetish for his lost childhood memory and his late father but also a metaphor referring to the protective and punitive essence of his father’s love. The colour of the sweater, being flamboyant blue when the speaker feels the fatherly love, being poor blue when his father gets irate at him, and being black when the speaker meditates upon his father’s death, implies a sense of puerile delight, grievance, and grief, functioning as an aid for Lee to map out his complex memories of his father.

The speaker’s ambivalent feelings come into view when he speaks of this tender and stringent God-like father:

God was lonely. So he made me.
 My father loved me. So he spanked me.
 It hurt him to do so. He did it daily. (Lee 1986: 66)

This poem dwells on this kind of contradiction that Lee experiences toward his father, who, on the one hand, is represented as a God-like figure that kept Lee in awe and grievance, and on the other hand a man brimming with paternal affection. Above all, his words appeal sardonically to the dubious cliché that paternal beating is “good” for the child, confirming the alarming fact that his father beat him “every day,” which has to be a very punitive notion of “love.” The kind of contradiction keeps emerging in the speaker’s mind no matter whether his father was still alive or dead:

The earth is flat. Those who fall off don’t return.
The earth is round. All things reveal themselves to men only
gradually.

I won’t last. Memory is sweet.
Even when it’s painful, memory is sweet.

Once, I was cold. So my father took off his blue sweater. (ibid.)

As a result, the harsh logic of “My father loved me. So he spanked me” is completely conflicting. It probably transposes his father’s words, but in doing so, reveals the often punitive nature of his paternal love. A sense of deep irony also rises when the speaker recalls the unbearable past and says “Even when it’s painful, memory is sweet,” indicating that the sadistic

dimension of this fatherly love is what the speaker braces for and that brace would “gradually” evolve into the melancholic resistance. Although the lyric “I” won’t last, “I” will follow the footsteps and memory his father left behind, having a defiant confrontation with the father. Although “I won’t last,” memory will. Consequently, the mourning for the father that “I” started is never settled. It is because once again “I” feel cold, whereas the father imposes both his love and discipline on the speaker, leading to the situations which repeat themselves endlessly as usual.

The mnemonic imprint on Lee’s memory of his father is apparent in another poem when Lee displays the contradictory feelings a son has toward a father, whose tremendous influences on the son continue after his death. As he declares bluntly in the poem “This Hour and What Is Dead”: “At this hour, what is dead is restless / and what is living is burning. / Someone tell him he should sleep now” (Lee 1990: 35), the speaker is obviously uttering a protest against his dead father who seems to keep interfering in the life of the living. His father’s austerity, however, represents only one side of the scale in this poem and it is balanced by exuberant tenderness:

My father keeps a light on by our bed
and readies for our journey.

He mends the ten holes in the knees
 of five pairs of boy's pants.
 His love for me is like his sewing:
 various colors and too much thread,
 the stitching uneven. But the needle pierces
 clean through with each stroke of his hand. (Lee 1990: 35)

Delicately interweaving his father's tenderness with seriousness in this poem, Lee weaves together a miniature piece of the history of modern Chinese exile. "Keeping a light on," always readying "for the journey," reveals a sense of uneasiness and precariousness characteristic of people in exile. Ever since Lee was born in Jakarta, he was aware from very young of the unfair treatment from both the Chinese and the Indonesian government, which compelled the Lees to expatriate from country to country. By the light the father does the stitching as if weaving the story of his family migrating from Asia to America onto "five pairs of boy's pants." Besides, by means of stitching his father "yokes" the family together in case anyone goes missing again.¹⁹ The poem suggests both his father's family devotion and incompetent needle-work ("too much thread, / the stitching uneven"), with that piercing needle a measure of his tenderness and potential violence, which

¹⁹ In an interview carried out in 1987, Lee mentions that one of his brothers was left in China when the whole family fled. Lee's parents were forced to make such a hard decision because that brother of Lee's was seriously ill and he couldn't move. And it took the family twenty-six years to have a reunion in the U.S.A. (Lee 2006: 20)

cause the spiritual affliction and physical pain when the speaker recalls his father.

Lee ingeniously stirs up the reader's sense of irritation by highlighting the verb "pierces," as if the stroke is stabbing at the heart. The readers feel the pain in reading the sentence as they are forced to pause at the word, standing out at the end of the line, and even protruding as the most conspicuous word in the stanza. In this regard, the stitching has converted not so much into a suture of a wound but into a violent action of exposing the wound, triggering the speaker's association with his father's "spanking him daily." Lee's father, on the one hand, showed his seriousness to ensure the safety of the family and insist on teaching children to read²⁰ in exile, and on the other hand, muffled up his children simply because he wanted to protect them. In other words, as a learned physician and priest, Lee's father appears to be a powerful man with care in one hand and cruelty in the other when he does the stitching in front of the children. So the resistance to a stern father and the obedience to a gentle father take place by turns in this poem. The metaphors of "piercing," "stitching," as well as the "open wound" hence refer to the disturbing trope of

²⁰ Both Lee's father and mother were classically educated in Chinese literature, which means they must memorise three hundred poems composed in the T'ang dynasty. Lee and his siblings grew up listening to their parents recite poems and being demanded to recite back to their parents. So the Lee children were immersed in a poetic environment even in exile. (Lee 2006: 18, 32)

Freudian melancholia, suggesting the speaker's (un)conscious efforts to resist his father and inability to find a replacement for his God-like father.

Additionally, the “piercing” and “stitching” might also imply the complex and neat work involved in the creation of the poem.

Lee further displays the tension between “what is dead” and “what is living.” In the unconscious, the speaker goes on to express his ambivalent sense of content and discontent in the following stanzas:

At this hour, what is dead is worried
and what is living is fugitive.

Someone tell him he should sleep now.

God, that old furnace, keeps talking
with his mouth of teeth,
a beard stained at feasts, and his breath
of gasoline, airplane, human ash.
His love for me feels like fire,
feels like doves, feels like river-water.

At this hour, what is dead is helpless, kind
and helpless. While the Lord lives.

Someone tell the Lord to leave me alone.
I've had enough of his love
that feels like burning and flight and running away.

(Lee 1990: 35-36)

This could be seen as one of Lee's most fiercely ambivalent poems about his

father's legacy to him, revealing his repugnance during the most pessimistic period of his life when he experienced the discrepancy between the ferocity and tenderness of his father. The father figure, somehow, has been transposed to an unmanageable other in this poem, associated simultaneously with "fire," "doves," and "river-water," signifying the ferociously paternal love. Since Lee has always been pointing to a larger and invisible presence beyond this visible world, in which God, Logos, or Tao governs, he seems to witness the vision of his father "living" there as a god watching his every move but the "god" is associated with "gasoline, airplane, human ash." The god is all contradiction as that "watch" from beyond burdens the speaker's shoulders with "fire" on the one side and with "doves" on the other. According to Freud, "these obsessional states of depression following upon the death of a loved person show us what the conflict due to ambivalence can achieve by itself when there is no regressive drawing-in libido" (Freud 1917: 251). The obsessional love-hate contradiction is further exemplified in Lee's comparison of the father figure to "that old furnace," which gives the speaker warmth of love but also truculently shows "his mouth of teeth" and devours "human ash." In a way Lee turns the speaker's rage outward, with his flames of anger burning like the old furnace. Therefore, in saying "I've had enough of his

love,” Lee articulates a sense of both the tyrannical nature of his father’s love and the melancholic protest against that othered Lord in his own mind as well as a loved otherness that the speaker is closely attached to.

The mixture of “fire burning” and “river-water flowing” gauges the complex love of his father, which in another poem “The Gift” Lee describes as “two measures of tenderness.” In this poem the speaker experiences both the pain caused by the splinter cut and the tenderness radiating from his father:

To pull the metal splinter from my palm
my father recited a story in a low voice.
I watched his lovely face and not the blade.
Before the story ended, he’d removed
the iron sliver I thought I’d die from.

I can’t remember the tale,
but hear his voice still, a well
of dark water, a prayer.
And I recall his hands,
two measures of tenderness
he laid against my face,
the flames of discipline
he raised above my head.

Had you entered that afternoon
you would have thought you saw a man
planting something in a boy’s palm,
a silver tear, a tiny flame. (Lee 1986: 15)

By virtue of “remembering” and “recalling” the speaker enters the invisible

realm where everything is truer than the visible world, and where he feels the pain as well as father's tenderness again. In that realm, he hears "[his] father recite a story," which is a tale within an anecdote in the form of poetry, a story told by a Chinese father within the history/his-story of twentieth century migrants, and a narrative within an epic of a larger presence. The father "recited" the story, rather than "made it up" and we might see it as an epitome of lost cultural legacies. Hence remembering the father and recalling the past through the story are like the splinter penetrating into strata of the soil of cultural histories. Removing the sliver, I would suggest, brings to light the hidden cultural remains and memories of the speaker and the legacy left by his father. Once the splinter has been taken away, the speaker's father "raised the flames of discipline" to ensure the boy has learned the (cultural) lesson. So, again, Lee stands in awe of his father by describing his father as a man of flames of discipline, just as the "old furnace" mentioned above.

The image of his father has a negative dimension as the speaker compares his father's voice to "a well / of dark water," with the bottom of the well/mind unfathomed. Drawing again upon the use of both fire and water to represent the intangibility and transformativity of his father, who was sometimes a tender man but at other times a man of ferocity, Lee captures the ambivalent

mind-set of a son in the face of a simultaneously benign, scathing, and powerful father. The transformativity of the father figure reflects the anti-consolatory codes embedded in the poem as the speaker does not focus only on an encomium of the deceased father. So the poem is sugar coated, seemingly eulogizing the tenderness of the father while also reflecting the other harsher side of the father. In this sense, it displays the latent ambivalent quality of modernist elegy as defined by Ramazani in *Poetry of Mourning*.

Furthermore, the duality of the dispositions of the father as well as the tenderness shown and compared in individual but similar events are also perceived when the speaker invites the reader to follow him and witness the actual circumstances:

Had you followed that boy
 you would have arrived here,
 where I bend over my wife's right hand.

Look how I shave her thumbnail down
 so carefully she feels no pain.
 Watch as I lift the splinter out.
 I was seven when my father
 took my hand like this,
 [...]
 And I did not lift up my wound and cry,
Death visited here!

I did what a child does
 when he's given something to keep.
 I kissed my father. (Lee 1986: 15-16)

Lee cleverly fuses the two summoning sentences—"Had you entered that afternoon" and "Had you followed that boy"—in the same stanza to build up the juxtaposition of the past and the present, the speaker's father and wife, "the iron sliver" the speaker thought he'd "die from" and the splinter that made the speaker's wife sob, the unknown space where his father removed the metal splinter from his palm for him and the hotel bathroom where his wife got her thumbnail hurt.²¹ These dualities have transcended the temporal sequence and spatial boundary and represented how massive a father's influence can be on his son: what the father did is literally duplicated when the son becomes a husband. At that instant the speaker realizes what the special "gift" he has got from his father is. He was given the gift, a man's tenderness toward his family, when he was seven and he keeps it for the rest of his life. Keeping the precious gift endorses both the ideas that installing a compensatory substitute for the loss of the father and that making the grief

²¹ Lee recounts his personal experience of removing the splinter from his wife's thumbnail in a hotel. He woke up to his wife's sobbing and got up to see his wife holding her bleeding hand at the bathtub. Here is his avowal: "My father was dead at the time, but when I bent down to remove the splinter I realized that I had learned that tenderness from my father" (Lee 1995b: 262).

protract without leaving the mourning resolved. As a consequence, the melancholic ambivalence is embodied in the kiss the speaker gave his father when his father took away the splinter, when his father passed away, and when they meet in the invisible terrain.

The gift Lee inherits from his father, according to “The Weight of Sweetness,” is “No easy thing to bear, the weight of sweetness. / Song, wisdom, sadness, joy: sweetness / equals three of any of these gravities” (Lee 1986: 20). Layers and layers of “sweetness” and tenderness pile up and fertilize the soil that imaginatively nurtures Lee’s childhood and even adulthood when his father is in another world. On the land grows a peach tree, which is Lee’s favourite fruit tree in a world he has been exposed to with and without his father. In “The Weight of Sweetness,” Lee recalls a scene where he and his father stood in the middle of an orchard of peaches:

See a peach bend
the branch and strain the stem until
it snaps.
Hold the peach, try the weight, sweetness
and death so round and snug
in your palm.
And, so, there is
the weight of memory:

Windblown, a rain-soaked

bough shakes, showering
 the man and the boy.
 They shiver in delight,
 and the father lifts from his son's cheek
 one green leaf
 fallen like a kiss.

The good boy hugs a bag of peaches
 his father has entrusted
 to him.
 Now he follows
 his father, who carries a bagful in each arm.
 See the look on the boy's face
 as his father moves
 faster and faster ahead, while his own steps
 flag, and his arms grow weak, as he labors
 under the weight
 of peaches. (Lee 1986: 20)

In Lee's poetic vision, each peach is a load fraught with his father's discipline and words so what he sees are boughs laden with hefty peaches/words, "the weight of sweetness," which could "bend / the branch and strain the stem until / it snaps." The cultural meaning of picking the peach and "entrusting to," on the one hand, indicates that his father hands down a cultural heritage and the responsibility of propping up a family to the speaker just like the sweater I discussed earlier in which Lee becomes the "rightful owner" in the next generation. On the other hand, the idea of death is also injected into the weight of sweetness because a peach is doomed to be rotten. One peach of

death, “so round and snug / in [the speaker’s] palm” foreshadows that his father has not many days left in this world. The notion of death would become true when the fruit ripens and the weight of sweetness and death is heavy enough to bend the branch and snaps it.

In contrast to the “bending” of the branch, the father appears to be an “unbending” figure with whom the speaker has been wrestling and fighting, but at other times the “unbending” person’s tenderness, “one green leaf / fallen like a kiss,” resolves the speaker’s hesitation about his love toward the father. Then, again, melancholic ambivalence emerges and is objectified as the peach and its fallen leaf. Moreover, the ambivalence manifests itself in the nectarine for it represents food and sweetness, sources of nourishment “entrusted” to the speaker, but also a heavy weight that it is hard for him as a young boy to carry, “as he labors / under the weight / of peaches.” Handing over his responsibility, his father then “moves / faster and faster ahead.” In order not to disappoint his father, the speaker’s steps “flag” to hold securely the nectarines in hands. The precariousness and discreetness involved in protecting the entrusted food and his father’s legacy are captured in Lee’s expanding and contracting the lines, which might also imply the ragged and discordant pace of the father and the son, in the last stanza in particular. In

this case, remembering the father figure has been translated into a ritual of modelling himself on his father, mending bonds between father and son, and communicating with the father. The complexity of the speaker's memory has also been unravelled by dissecting the compositions of the fruit, containing "sweetness / and death." Therefore, by means of recalling the memory Lee manages to mediate between the material world and the world beyond and he gives the readers a palpable sense of the unbearable weight of sweetness, memory, and death, in the shape of peaches, giving us a resonant sense of his own ambivalence of resisting and accepting the loss of his loved father.

Atypical Mourning of the Father

Lee constantly refers to his late father throughout each of his books of poems. In this sense, the loss of his father figures occupies the heart of his poetic project and injects it with an element of elegy. Speaking of his father, Lee mourns:

He opened up the whole realm of death and the dead, and certainly I felt an even deeper mystery in the world. When he died he took part of me with him, and part of me lives there among the dead. Ultimately, the world of the dead is very present with us, and we're

not always aware of that. His death meant a lot to me. It allowed a lot of mystery. (Lee 2000a: 98)

In order to explore how Lee's father as a poetic subject influences him and shapes his sense of the mystery of life and death, we will have to identify the elegiac codes that Lee deploys in his poems.

The melancholic ambivalence of Lee's and the speaker can be seen as one of the symptoms of modern elegy more generally because Lee's poetry apparently does not displace his affection from the dead nor translate his grief into consolation, as in traditional elegy. As a matter of fact, ambivalence, revealed in his simultaneous revering and rebelling against his father, is the dynamic force that runs throughout Lee's poetry about his father and his own metaphysical notions about the individual's relations with the universe. The active presence of his father and his father's tenderness and ferocity bears witness to Lee's breaking away from the conventional elegiac writing of normative mourning and stresses his struggle against the immensity of his father's influence despite the transpiration of his corporeal body to the invisible world. His persistent interest in the father figure is suggestive of his failure to find a replacement for the loss of the beloved object. The relationship to the loved and lost object, according to Freud, "is complicated

by the conflict due to ambivalence. The ambivalence is either constitutional, i.e. is an element of every love-relation formed by this particular ego, or else it proceeds precisely from those experiences that involved the threat of losing the object” (Freud 1917: 256). “The threat of losing the object” could be one of the reasons why Lee is engaged in keeping his father “alive” in his mind. Yet, in the meantime, he is also keen to put away this massive figure who affects his whole life. Lee explains why he writes so much about his father in order to exorcise the omnipresent and omniscient god:

I have to get beyond the figure of this all-knowing, all-powerful, fierce, loving, and all-suffering figure. I have to somehow get beyond that in my own life, in order to continue, in order to achieve my own shapeliness. Or I’ll be forever contending with the existence of these fabricated characteristics of all-powerful, all-knowing, and so on. Part of me has to dismantle that in order to get through it in my own life. I guess I’m doing that in my own writing, too. (Lee 2006: 47)

In the poem “My Father, in Heaven, Is Reading Out Loud,” we get to see how this exorcism works.

In the first two stanzas the juxtaposition of the presence of his father in heaven and on earth, past and present, reveals the ambivalence he had been feeling since the death of the father, and what’s more, offers an extraordinary

way of expressing mourning and nostalgia:

My father, in heaven, is reading out loud
to himself Psalms or news. Now he ponders what
he's read. No. He is listening for the sound
of children in the yard. Was that laughing
or crying? So much depends upon the
answer, for either he will go on reading,
or he'll run to save a child's day from grief.
As it is in heaven, so it was on earth.

Because my father walked the earth with a grave,
determined rhythm, my shoulders ached
from his gaze. Because my father's shoulders
ached from the pulling of oars, my life now moves
with a powerful back-and-forth rhythm:
nostalgia, speculation. Because he
made me recite a book a month, I forget
everything as soon as I read it. And knowledge
never comes but while I'm mid-stride a flight
of stairs, or lost a moment on some avenue. (Lee 1990: 39)

Lee draws the title of this poem from "The Lord's Prayer" and there is a word play on it in the first stanza: "Our Father in heaven, / hallowed be your name. / Your kingdom come, / you will be done, / on earth, as it is in heaven." As the speaker says, "As it is in heaven, so it was on earth," Lee on the one hand sanctifies his dead father as the Christian Father in heaven while on the other humanise his father as he "ached from the pulling of oars." Furthermore, here Lee also draws a comparison of the ache between his father's shoulders

and his own. The rowing of oars might suggest a sense of vacillation that keeps the speaker in mourning, grief, and grievance for/against the father and that polarises the violence setting his father and family in exile and the settlement in a foreign land. The “powerful back-and-forth rhythm” not only illustrates the rhythm of the speaker’s life but draws forth the rhythm of the poem. Also, it appears that the speaker levels a reproach against his father for “pulling oars,” which caused his life now to move back and forth and to get caught between “nostalgia and speculation.” Were it not for his father’s decision to go into exile, his father’s sternness, and his father’s death, the speaker would not have had to shoulder the heavy loads of responsibilities, pains, “nostalgia and speculation.” That “powerful back-and-forth rhythm: / nostalgia, speculation” actually derives from his father’s “pulling of oars” when he was alive and from “grave, / determined rhythm” of steps and “gaze” from up above after his demise, so that the speaker feels pains in his shoulders.

Apart from blames for his father, the speaker also embraces his father’s loving kindness when he describes “[his] father, in heaven, is reading out loud” and “is listening for the sound / of children in the yard.” In reminiscence of his father, the speaker eyewitnesses his childhood in the yard,

where his father does the same as what he did on earth to “save a child’s day from grief.” Though his father was reading, he paid attention in the meantime to whether children were “laughing / or crying.” Whether he would carry on reading or “run to save a child’s day from grief” depends so much upon the noises children made. A reader would quickly and easily associate the line “So much depends upon” with that in William Carlos Williams’ s “The Red Wheelbarrow” published in 1923. One of the gists of “The Red Wheelbarrow” is to portray and appreciate the everyday necessity of the tools of manual labour, whereas Lee’s sentimental meditation on a father’s affectionate love for kids renders similar ideas in terms of everyday life. By comparing to such a common, simple item as a wheelbarrow, whose value people rarely notice or consider due to its stillness, Lee characterises a father’s tranquil assertion of wholehearted love turned into a prompt action “to save a child’s day from grief” in an ordinary family’s yard. Both poems of Williams’s and Lee’s convey vivid, precise images and complex emotions by representing common everyday object or action. And even at the moment when the speaker is crying while recalling his deceased father, he assumes that his father, in heaven, will run to save his sorrowful day from grief.

Judging from the two stanzas of this poem, I would suggest that this

poem has the quality of conventional sentimental consolations while at the same time quite a few anti-consolatory codes are imbedded in the poetic lines. In other words, the speaker is immersed in the memory for the loved and perished object and even denounces him as the source of pains and the reason for emptiness of mind and moment (“knowledge / never comes [...] lost a moment on some avenue,” which exactly exemplifies a person’s atypical mourning for his father.

“Saving a child’s day from grief” is what any father would do when he sees his child climbing on a tree, which is mentioned, though not here straightforwardly, in another two of Lee’s poems. In the poem “Dreaming of Hair,” the speaker recalls the same figure of a powerful and protective father, intervening when he climbs a tree:

Hair ascends the tree
Of my childhood—the willow
I climbed
one bare foot and hand at a time,
feeling the knuckles of the gnarled tree, hearing
my father plead from his window, *Don’t fall!* (Lee 1986: 22)

Climbing a tree is merely an incident that Lee takes to memorise and mourn his father, in an ironical way though. As Lee comments on his perceptions of

hair: “For me the image of hair was one of great power in the case of Samson— but a kind of dumb power [...] and the notion of Absalom whose hair was an image of beauty and doom” (Lee 2006: 23). Though saving a child’s day from grief is a display of the paternal love, it even demonstrates the dead father’s engagement in and entanglement with the living’s mind and life. That hair ascending the tree might refer to Absalom’s hair getting tangled in branches and causing his death. Thus Lee’s use of the metaphor of hair appropriately indicates the entanglement of the life and death and he is mocking his father’s death as a doom like Absalom’s destiny. By alluding to the stories of Absalom’s hair, Lee purposefully endows hair with manifold meanings—beauty, strength, memory, paternal love, and most important of all in this poem, his father’s scathing severity and thrilling shackles:

Out of the grave
 my father’s hair
 bursts. A strand
 pierces my left sole, shoots
 up bone, past ribs,
 to the broken heart it stitches,
 then down,
 swirling in the stomach, in the groin, and down,
 through the right foot.

What binds me to this earth?
 What remembers the dead

and grows toward them?

I'm tired of thinking.
 I long to taste the world with a kiss.
 I long to fly into hair with kisses and weeping,
 remembering an afternoon
 when, kissing my sleeping father, I saw for the first time
 behind the thick swirl of his black hair,
 the mole of wisdom,
 a lone planet spinning slowly. (Lee 1986: 23-24)

For mourners who want to put the dead away, “At his hour, what is dead is restless” (Lee 1990: 35) and they at some point would strike back. The hair actually bursts out of his father’s grave and binds the father and the son and thus the life of the son is a doom as well. It might also implicate the father’s powerful domination extended to the speaker wherever he is and the obstinacy of the speaker’s father like Samson’s regardless of others’ expostulation. In this regard “Dreaming of Hair” is an elegy showing the mourner/speaker’s immersion in the loss of the father without transcendence or redemption of it. “The mole of wisdom, / a lone planet spinning slowly” that the speaker spots at the swirl of his father’s hair involves the speaker into the swirl, literally immersing in it.

The image of hair, apart from being a doom, is also transferred into both a thread that connects the past with the present and an embodiment of power

which secures a child's life and binds the rest of his adult life. In spite of the tenacity of the hair, the boy recalls the outcome of climbing a tree in the poem "Goodnight":

I crept to the edge of a roof to reach
a petal-decked branch.

It snapped, I
dropped, screaming down sky

and flowering. My father yelled
my name, ran out to find me sprawled,

dazed, gripping his crushed gift, thrust
at him in my bloody fist.

He plunges below us now, as we
fall soundless toward him. (Lee 1990: 67)

The speaker's father, regrettably, could not save his child's day from grief but further brings a sense of grief to his child during the rest of his life. The "petal-decked branch" symbolises a rosy dream but one which suddenly falls apart. The fall makes the speaker "flower," "scream," and "dazed," with his posture "sprawling" suggesting the moment of epiphany that he comes to have, and thus the speaker reckons that to achieve something one must have experienced many setbacks. His "bloody fist" is the proof to show that he

could do something for his father by “gripping” the “gift” he picked from the tree. He also manifests his maturity as an adult by feeling his father’s love because his father’s spirit in heaven tries to “plunge” below the speaker and his father, at the moment when the speaker recalled the scene, to stop them from getting hurt. Fortunately, they, in the speaker’s vision, “fall soundless” because his father’s spirit catches them, even though the father himself is portrayed as plunging “below us” and therefore now falling himself.

Nevertheless, according to the lines I discuss earlier, the speaker might defiantly react against his father by purposefully forgetting what his father demanded him to recite. He even feels irritation in his shoulders owing to his father’s gaze from heaven. The speaker only realises his relation with the father and that his father had expended much care and thought on the children when he is “mid-stride a flight / of stairs, or lost a moment on some avenue.” He seems to feel the same ache as that in his father’s shoulders when his father rowed the oars hard to get the family away from perils. Since the start of the life of being exile, the speaker’s life, in destitution and desperation, “moves / with a powerful back-and-forth rhythm.” In the poem “Furious Versions,” Lee describes in detail the vagabond life they led in his early days in order to escape the threat of death:

And everywhere, fire,
 corridors of fire, brick and barbed wire.
 Soldiers sweep the streets
 for my father. My mother
 hides him, haggard,
 in the closet.
 The booted ones herd us
 to the sea.
 Waves furl, boats
 and bodies drift out, farther out.
 My father holds my hand, he says,
Don't forget any of this.
 A short, bony-faced corporal
 asks politely, deferring to class,
What color suit, Professor, would you like
to be buried in? Brown or blue?
 A pistol butt turns my father's spit to blood. (Lee 1990: 17-18)

It is worth highlighting the fact that the verbs in this passage, taken from the third section of "Furious Versions," are in present tense, which suggests the speaker recalls the bitter memory as if it is still taking place. The use of present and past tense in turn also reveals the rhythm of memory in the speaker's mind and life. Both the alliterations, falling on "brick and barbed" as well as "soldiers sweep the streets," and the internal rhymes of "sweep" and "street" create a disturbingly violent atmosphere, counter to the consolatory logic of conventional elegy. The scene of "a pistol butt turn[ing] [his] father's spit to blood" is shockingly visceral.

In contrast to standard mourning, the dismal life of exile is what the speaker feels mournful for, and the mourning for the personal and familial history of exile can be considered anti-elegiac and anti-consolatory because there is no way for the speaker to transcend the loss of his father but only immerse himself in it. Lee might feel assimilated to American culture with the passing of time, but there must be a rupture between his culture of origin, embodied in his parents, and the dominant American culture. As a result, the rupture between the two cultural terrains forms a transitional space where the mourner resists the normative elegiac salves from the two cultures but practices immersion in the sense of grief and displacement, “waiting for the dead to come back,” as Lee declares (Lee 2006: 44). Thus in 1991 when speaking with poets Anthony Piccione and Stan Sanvel Rubin at the State University of New York College at Brockport, Lee claims that he felt a sense of grief when writing poems and then organising them into a book:

while I was moving away from the figure of the father I was also moving away from the last evidence of a life I would never see again—that is, the life of the refugee and the immigrant. [...] Part of me wants to become assimilated in America and at home. I want to feel at home here in this continent. And as I put him away, part of me realizes that what I’m putting away is this vestige of refugee and immigrant life, which has to do with old coats and rotting shoes and books falling apart and old luggage. I’m putting all of that away so

that in a way I'm moving into a life that I don't really recognize. I'm leaving a life I recognize—my father, that ferocity, that consummate love for a God that devours. I see all of that and I recognize it. I know how to live under those conditions. I know how to live with the rotten luggage and the inability to speak in another person's tongue. The new thing I'm moving into, I don't recognize. When I was putting the book together, it was full of a grief as I was moving into America. I don't recognize America. I don't know how to be American—although I am ostensibly very American and assimilated. But there must be a void deep inside of me, still wandering around with his father in Macao and Singapore with all his luggage and stuff. I feel deeply attached to that.” (Lee 2006: 47-48)

Lee admits he is assimilated to American culture, but that this is only “ostensibly,” i.e. outwardly, and legally. Psychologically he still feels attached to yet meanwhile detached from his father culture despite his resistance to the influence of his powerful parent. Lee's case resembles that of Chin's as both of them spiritually wander in an alternative transnational site I called distanced assimilation earlier. The “grief” felt at “moving into America” is felt in a number of key poems about his father, as we shall see. In such a “void,” a special topographical realm between two powerful cultures, the poet tends to find a standpoint to make an utterance more easily. Lee says the ethnic identity is not what he develops an interest in as that is a form of “horizontal dialogue” with the culture while he pays more attention to the dialogue with the universe, which is “the highest realization of art” (Lee

2000b: 131). Nonetheless, it seems that he cannot deny that the dialogue carried on horizontally is one of the primordial and dynamic forces that activates his desires for writing to exorcise his god-like father.

Deconstruction of this deified father began when Lee opened his father's Bible after his death and read his notes in the margins and underlined passages in sections such as Song of Songs. Lee believes that his father read it as "a poem about sexuality" (Lee 1995b: 263) while nevertheless in the pulpit he is a priest preaching a sermon seriously on the Gospel. He then gains more understanding of his father and reckons that he was "struggling to come to terms with his own belief" (262). Lee describes him as "a man who was saying one thing but who was living another life" (263). The passionate, erotic, or romantic dimension of Lee's father is disclosed in the poem "Early in the Morning":

While the long grain is softening
in the water, gurgling
over a low stove flame, before
the salted Winter Vegetable is sliced
for breakfast, before the birds,
my mother glides an ivory comb
through her hair, heavy
and black as calligrapher's ink.

She sits at the foot of the bed.

My father watches, listens for
the music of comb
against hair.

My mother combs,
pulls her hair back
tight, rolls it
around two fingers, pins it
in a bun to the back of her head.
For half a hundred years she has done this.
My father likes to see it like this.
He says it is kempt.

But I know
It is because of the way
my mother's hair falls
when he pulls the pins out.
Easily, like the curtains
when they unites them in the evening. (Lee 1986: 25)

This poem is a poetic imagination and reconstruction of the parents' marriage written in the present tense and symbolised in the scene of combing, tying and untying hair. Only in the last stanza does the lyric "I" come to realisation of the humanised and erotic dimension of his father. At the beginning of the poem, cooking rice for breakfast may imply the exuberant sexual desire of men and women after a good night's sleep for the desire is like the "flame" blazing and "the long grain gurgling" to release energy. While waiting for the breakfast to be cooked, combing and tying hair is the everyday routine of the speaker's mother for half a century and what the father likes to "watch and

listen for.” The image of hair here is transformed into a representation of beauty, love, and sexual and fetishist craving rather than power or doom that I have quoted from Lee’s words earlier. Thus it can be seen that the speaker’s father has very deep affection for his spouse and his sexual urge is aroused when his wife is combing and tying hair in the morning, as well as untying hair in the evening. And untying hair could be regarded as a form of liberation of sex in the speaker’s parents. In these successive poetic scenes it is as if Lee were viewing things from the viewpoint of his father leaning against the headboard of the bed, watching his wife combing her hair and making music with the comb. Obviously, the father relishes the daily routine of his wife and has deemed it the art of Chinese calligraphy as well as playing an “ivory” instrument. Lee is making every stroke of combing give out a harmonious sound. The combination of both visual and auditory senses of having appreciated one’s own wife “for half a hundred years” affirms the long-term carnal loyalty of his father. The unification of the corporeal presences of Lee’s parents is implicitly shown when they “unite” the curtains in the evening.

Lee’s uncovering the curtains in his parents’ room surely allows the speaker and the reader to catch a glimpse of his humanised father. In

addition to the erotic dimension of the father, the poet remembers and recreates his humanised father as the vulnerable and powerless, who in the face of difficulties could do nothing but wait. In “My Father, in Heaven, Is Reading Out Loud,” the speaker expounds how his father looks upon the waiting and then puts it into practice:

But I don't disparage scholars;
my father was one and I loved him,
who packed his books once, and all of our belongings,
then sat down to await instruction
from his god, yes, but also from a radio.
At the doorway, I watched, and I suddenly
knew he was one like me, who got my learning
under a lintel; he was one of the powerless,
to whom knowledge came while he sat among
suitcases, boxes, old newspapers, string.

He did not decide peace or war, home or exile,
escape by land or escape by sea.
He waited merely, as always someone
waits, far, near, here, hereafter, to find out:
is it praise or lament hidden in the next moment? (Lee 1990: 40)

Lee not only deconstructs the sacredness of the father but also makes an ironical remark about him as the father “sat down to await instruction / from his god” and “also from a radio.” The speaker's father in this poem is thus associated with Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's famous play

Waiting for Godot, who insist on waiting for the elusive Godot. Like Godot, who eventually never arrives in that play, the speaker's father's god seems to be a titular and illusory figure and have never turned up in the end because the speaker's father "waited merely, as always someone / waits, far, near, here, hereafter." The powerful father is indeed, to the speaker's knowledge, "one of the powerless," who "sat among / suitcases, boxes, old newspapers, string" when in desperate exile, in contrast to the powerful man "pulling the oars" to save his family. That opposition of "home or exile" goes to the heart of this memory, and of so much of Lee's poetry of mourning.

The speaker's father could do nothing but wait for the apocalypse, revelation, and redemption transmitted from up above ("his god" and "a radio"). This scene of sitting among suitcases and boxes and merely waiting for uncertainties perfectly illustrates how helpless his father, the breadwinner and head of the Lee family, is. The poet continues to deflect the normative glorification of the deceased to a realisation of the father as a powerless ordinary man who "did not decide peace or war, home or exile / escape by land or escape by sea" but can only involuntarily wait until his god reveals itself and chooses him, in other words, until the knowledge and truth arrive. The father could only wait to find out what he would receive after his waiting

and in his afterlife as the waiting could bring “praise or lament” in the end.

Despite the exposedness of his father’s vulnerability, Lee in his mind still feels like “wandering around with his father in Macao and Singapore with all his luggage and stuff” (Lee 2006: 48). He “feels deeply attached to that” because he has gained insight that “he was one like me,” in which a fellow sense places the father and the son on the same scale. Such an ambivalence toward the father leads to a query raised by the speaker: “Is it praise or lament hidden in the next moment?” which is absolutely a question for the modern elegy that whether normative grief and praise or intense criticisms should be the focus of the mourning.

“Waiting for a Final Shapeliness to Occur”

The spiritual longing and repulsion toward the late father at the same time develop a unique way of memorialising the deceased in the context of modern elegy instead of speaking in laudatory terms to extol the dead. Such melancholic ambivalence constitutes a dynamic force in Lee’s poetry and according to Lee his poetry is packed with longing, desire, and waiting, which are the rudimentary factors of a human’s ambivalence and struggle in the face

of loss. He tells his readers in the poem “The Waiting” that they should learn to wait:

Love, these lines
 accompany our want, nameless
 or otherwise, and our waiting.
 And since we’ve not learned
 how not to want,
 we’ve had to learn,
 by waiting, how to wait.
 So I wait
 well. (Lee 1990: 63)

Longing and waiting are inter-related in these terse lines. The shifting position and form of the verbs—“want” and “wait(ing)”—give the poem and waiting a changing weight and endow the waiting with a different level of meaning. They show the poem is both supple and shapely. Lee further gives an annotation to the lines quoted above: “It has to do with desire, of course: the waiting is so fraught with desire, and longing. It’s the hardest thing to do” (Lee 2006: 44). He gives a fuller account of this in an interview:

For me so much of poetry and the making of poetry have to do with a willingness to wait for something to yield itself. It’s a powerlessness that one allows to occur. In my own life I feel as if I do a lot of waiting, and it seems to me a proper posture of the heart, or the mind, waiting for the poem to arrive. Or waiting for a final shapeliness to occur in my own life. Or waiting for a god to show

himself. Waiting for the dead to come back. (Lee 2006: 44)

These words reveal that Lee yearns to represent a “final shapeliness” of life, death, and poetry in his poetic lines. Some statements made by Lee when he talks about the process of composing “The City in Which I Love You” might show indirectly that his conception of shapeliness makes him a perfectionist: “during the three years most of it was cutting and revising. It was originally about forty pages and I cut it down to what it is in the book” (Lee 2006: 52). A far crazier thing happened when he was trying to get the final draft of his memoir *The Winged Seed* written: “I was writing like a book a week. [...] It’s going to have to contain some narrative and has to have some length. Somehow it has to accomplish the feeling that the book was an instant in time—one instant—the way a lyric poem is. The poem is an instant of seeing, and I wanted the book to have the feel as though it was just a flash. I didn’t know how I was going to accomplish that except that I would have to sit down and see if I could write a book in one night. [...] I did that for five years” (Lee 2006: 55-56). As a consequence, his pursuit of and waiting for the perfection, or final shapeliness in his own words, leads him to reconsider and remember his relation to the father over and over again in his poems and prose.

His idea of shapeliness is mediated through time and by virtue of the image of the rose Lee has managed to realise that his relation to his father could be negotiated in an unconventional way of mourning. Explaining his intentions in composing the poem, Lee said: “I’m hoping that [...] the long poem, “Always a Rose,” speak to a kind of education of the spirit. Of course, I don’t mean formal education. I mean a coming to terms, fierce terms even, with certain aspects of my life, and my father’s life. That’s what I was hoping it would do by being broken up this way” (Lee 2006: 22). What Lee calls an “education of the spirit” is his more upbeat equivalent of the Freudian “work of mourning.” At the very beginning of “Always a Rose,” Lee asks a key question which gives the entire poem and his notion of mourning a questioning form and which prompts readers to ponder over:

What shape floats
in the dark window, what
ragged form?
Mouth, scream, edges
barbed, it balances
on a long, spiked, crooked
stem. I know now,
as if I’d never known, this
black shape within the night’s black shape. (Lee 1986: 37)

The poem begins with a question on form/shape and the rest of the poem

endeavours to answer it and balance it. The silhouette of the rose in the poet's mind is not the scarlet rosy flower with romantic implications but a gloomy and murky flower blooming with "ragged form." The opening lines are suffused with a good number of such "dark" and incisive images including "ragged," "Mouth," "scream," "barbed," "spiked," twofold "black shape," and "the night," all of which are associated with sombre, piercing, and devouring death. So the key question at the opening foreshadows the keynote of this poem as well as Lee's notion of life and death, his father's in particular, and that "black shape" of the rose acts as a counterweight against the conventional consolatory laws of elegy.

Because of his obsession with the rose, as he has confessed in one of his interviews (Lee 2006: 22), in the course of the poem the rose is converted into a grand and complex symbol packed with layers and layers of the modern history of an individual and familial exile. The rose also functions as a buffer which coordinates the tension and harmony between Lee and his father, in life and death. As Lee speaks bluntly in the poem:

Odorous and tender flower-
body, I eat you
to recall my first misfortune.
Little, bitter

body, I eat you
 to understand my grave father.
 Excellent body of layers tightly
 wound around nothing,
 I eat you to put my faith in grief.
 Singed at the edges, dying
 from the flame you live by, I
 eat you to sink into
 my own body. Secret body
 of deep liquor,
 I eat you
 down to your secret. (Lee 1986: 40)

The emotional, sensual, and carnal dimensions of the lyric “I” are well represented in his desire to devour the rose to acquire the “secret” by exploring through layers of petals to the very core. We should pay heed to the intensive use of the words “eat” and “body” in this stanza because they are used punningly to connote both sensual and spiritual longing. There are five uses of the word “eat” and “body” each within sixteen lines, forming a highly concentrated poetic fabric capturing the speaker’s libidinal projections.

In his foreword to *Rose*, Gerald Stern, Lee’s mentor at the University of Pittsburgh, comments on “Always a Rose”: “This poem is almost different in kind from the others, partly because of its length, partly because of the disjunct but accumulative sections, and partly because of the concentration on the mystic symbol. The rose becomes not something to stare at, but to

consume. The rose, which is history, the past, a 'doomed profane flower' to be adored and destroyed. To be eaten. Like the speaker" (Lee 1986: 10).

The rose as a mythic symbol of history to be eaten derives, according to Lee, from a Chinese dish: "The Chinese cook roses for medicinal purposes. My mother was a great rose-cooker; she used to fry them and make them taste like grapes" (Lee 2006: 22). As a consequence, Lee adds the rose to his own recipe, prescription, and poetry: "Black Chinese roses my grandmother / describes to anyone who'll listen; / the ones that tasted like grapes / when she ate them as a girl" (Lee 1986: 38). In this sense in eating his Chinese ancestral history the lyric "I" means to take in and digest both his and his paternal and maternal past and then convert the absorption into a nutrient for his new body while assimilating into American culture.

What's even more, the rose is also an essential transcultural signifier for the speaker to "recall [his] first misfortune" and "understand [his] grave father." The poet's first misfortune might be the fact that he was born in a foreign land with respect to his parents. Not long after he was born, he was doomed to go into exile with his family. Even though he would like to hold his father to account, the father, however, is in the grave and there is a pun here on "grave," which also means grim and serious. The way the lyric "I"

comprehend his father is, of course, to “eat [the rose] to put [his] faith in grief” so that the rose would “sink into / [his] own body.” What the speaker does tallies with Freud’s account of melancholia: “The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it” (Freud 1917 [1915]: 249-50). In other words, part of the ego of the speaker has been displaced by the object, the rose, the alternative representation of his father, and it is thus inhibited, leaving the work of mourning uncompleted. Stern also mentions that Lee’s search for his father’s spirit is “a willingness to let the sublime enter his field of concentration and take over” (Lee 1986: 9). Yet the process of letting the sublime (the mystic, the rose, the father) take over the speaker’s mind is hazardous because the lyric “I” get “singd” and almost dies from “the flame” it goes off. The rose, as a consequence, is absolutely not merely a rose. It is the holy grail that the poet has long been searching for and it contains the “secret,” which according to Lee, could be the truest nature that he has always wanted to attain.

The speaker continues to look for an appropriate manner that the work of mourning could be resolved and in the end achieve a kind of sublime state

that Lee calls final shapeliness. Lee firmly believes in what he learns from his father that “Life is like a great big flower, and it keeps opening and opening and opening perpetually” (Lee 2006: 22). His mother and grandmother, in Lee’s eyes good rose-cookers, also imparted to him knowledge that the rose has medicinal effects. Therefore, to attain that desirable state, the speaker invokes his own spirit and that of his father, reiterating the balmy effect of the rose and re-examining their history of exile and father-son relationship:

Listen now to something human.
 I know moments measured
 by a kiss, or a tear, a pass of the hand along a loved one’s face.
 I know lips that love me,
 that return my kisses
 by leaving on my cheek their salt.
 And there is one I love, who hid her heart behind a stone.
 Let there be a rose for her, who was poor,
 who lived through ten bad years, and then ten more,
 who took a lifetime to drain her bitter cup.
 And there is one I love, smallest among us—
 let there be a rose for him—
 who was driven from the foreign schoolyards
 by fists and yelling, who trembled in anger in each re-telling,
 who played alone all the days,
 though the afternoon trees were full of children.
 And there is one I love who limps over this planet,
 dragging her steel hip.
 Always a rose for her.
 And always a rose for one I love, lost
 in another country, from whom I get year-old letters.
 And always a rose for one I love

exiled from one republic and daily defeated in another,
 who was shunned by brothers and stunned by God,
 who couldn't sleep because of voices,
 who raised his voice, then his hand
 against his children, against his children
 going. For him a rose, my lover of roses and of God,
 who taught me to love the rose, and fed me roses, under whose
 windows

I planted roses, for whose tables I harvest roses,
 who put his hand on my crown and purified me
 in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,
 who said, *Get out! You're no longer my son!*
 who never said, *Forgive me. Why do I die? Hold me, hold me.*
 My father the Godly, he was the chosen.
 My father almighty, full of good fear.
 My father exhausted, my beloved.
 My father among the roses and thorns.
 My father rose, my father thorn. (Lee 1986: 41-42)

The rose is absolutely a pregnant signifier in poets' vision, past and present, as Lee's lines acknowledge. In William Blake's "The Sick Rose," the rose is a conventional symbol for love infected and corrupted by "the invisible worm":

"O Rose thou art sick! / The invisible worm / That flies in the night, / In the howling storm, / Has found out thy bed / of crimson joy: / And his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy" (Blake 1972: 213). For W. B. Yeats the rose in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" is a symbol referring to manifold meanings, one of which is his undying love for Maud Gonne and Ireland, both of whom the poet is obsessed with and celebrates their beauty and tragic

suffering: “Come near; I would, before my time to go, / Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways: / Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days” (Yeats 1967: 35). When T. S. Eliot concludes “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets*, with “And the fire and the rose are one” (Eliot 2004: 198), the rose has become a symbol for love, royalty, and divinity that can be simultaneously purifying and destroying. In Lee’s poetic vision, the symbolic meanings of the rose could be a combination of the qualities represented in those earlier poets’ uses of the rose but also distinct from those as Lee’s rose is even more vibrant in terms of its transposition that it symbolises.

Here the rose sometimes is the incarnation of the speaker’s father, “who taught [him] to love the rose, and fed [him] roses”; sometimes it is a female character, “who hid her heart behind a stone”; at other times it is an embodiment of the speaker himself, “who was driven from the foreign schoolyards / by fists and yelling, who trembled in anger in each re-telling”; sometimes it is a paragon rose, which sublimates time, history, and “moments measured / by a kiss, or a tear, a pass of the hand along a loved one’s face.” The speaker invites his readers to listen to his confession of “something human” about his father, who was “exiled from one republic and daily defeated in another” and whom he always struggles to love as well as hate.

He not only hates the severe father who shouted at him “*Get out! You’re no longer my son!*” but loves and blames the father who is immovable in speech but soft in heart when he asks post-mortem for his son’s pardon and help. Still, the poet insists its speaker holds a grudge against his father in the wake of his departure, partly because he never had a chance to hear his father explain the cause of the death which caused such turbulence in his life.

In spite of the ambivalence the speaker has toward his father, he remains unswerving by saying “always a rose for one I love.” So we see this father figure was covered with “a rose / left for dead, heaped with the hopeless dead, / its petals still supple” (Lee 1986: 37) and then transformed into a thorny rose which symbolises the father’s tenderness like a flower radiating its fragrance, but also his fiery temper like its thorns and vermilion petals, and of course, his abysmal inner world which resembles the core of the flower in Lee’s witty writing. The repetition of “My father” in the last five lines of this section not only functions as the speaker’s sermon and balances the rest of the passage but also underscores the contrasting dimensions of the father figure (“My father almighty, full of good fear. / [...] / My father rose, my father thorn”) when the speaker mourns over him. The last line of this section also puns on the word “rose,” whose part of speech is a verb, indicating that the

speaker's father "rose" from death (like Jesus, who on the third day "rose from the dead") as well as the past. The rose, thereupon, is a complicated combination of inextricable meanings and it needs to be stripped off layer by layer by the reader.

The intensive use of the rose in the fifth section forms a crucial rhythm and pattern within the poem and "always a rose for one I love" certainly makes a keynote of it. That rhythm of the symbolic use of the rose can be seen as a musical and pictorial ceremony of mourning, which accounts for the shapeliness of the entire poem as well as the speaker's truest nature. The shapeliness of Lee's rose is also reminiscent of the "impossible richness" and "infinite bloom" of the German language poet Rainer Maria Rilke's "Rose":

"Enthroned one [...] you are the full-blown, infinite bloom, / the wholly indefatigable thing: / impossible richness, silk dress on silk dress / laid upon a body of pure light — / and yet one naked petal will negate / all attire, all show of outwardness. / Through the centuries, your fragrance spoke / its sweetest word to us, never the same; suddenly it fills the air, like frame" (Paterson 36).

The petals, a symbol of closed eyelids, of "the wholly indefatigable thing" cover and negate our eyesight of the physical beings and guide us with its fragrance to an even larger presence filled with the fragrance. "The full-blown, infinite

bloom, / the wholly indefatigable thing: / impossible richness” of the rose corresponds exactly to the final shapeliness of the life and the poem that Lee longs for when mourning over someone or an object that matters and fades away. For this reason, “always a rose for one I love” not only conveys a sense of rhythmic ritual but also confirms what Seamus Heaney says in “Funeral Rites”: “We pine for ceremony, / customary rhythms” (Heaney 1990: 53). By means of adoring, vilifying, and eating the rose ritually, the speaker tastes the bitterness of mourning his father: “a bitterness rich with grief, / a black flavor far back in the throat, / one part soil, two parts root, and all the filaments of rain” (Lee 1986: 40). So, the ceremony of eating the rose generates the shapeliness of the rose, which delicately defines the speaker’s complicated relationships with his father and the mutual influences on each other:

You sag,
turn your face
from me, body
made of other bodies, each doomed.

Remember it was I who bled for you, I, born
hungry among the hungry,
third in the last generation of the old country,
of the family Plum, a brood
distinguished by madness,
tales of chains and wailing.
It was I who saw you withered and discarded,

I, who taught my father patience, and dulled the blade
 of his anger,
 who eat you now, before morning,
 when you must climb your ladder of thorns and grow to death.
 I, middle stone in the row of stones
 on my mother's ring, I,
 the flawed stone, saw you dying
 and revived you. I saw you
 dying and called you mine.
 I named you each day you remained:
 Scorn, Banish, Grieve, Forgive, Love.

My meditation, my recitative,
 I love you best this way,
 an old brittle trumpet,
 a shred of my mother's dress, no longer regal.
 I love your nakedness.
 Naked, shy flower, sweet
 to my nose, and bitter
 to my tongue, among
 the dying things
 are you and I. (Lee 1986: 44-45)

At the end of this poem as well as his father's life, the speaker reiterates to the
 rose the history of "the family Plum," a play on the word plum which in
 Mandarin it is pronounced the same as the surname "Lee," as well as the
 history of "the old country" that is "withered and discarded." The history
 that made the family Plum and the old country a "body / made of other
 bodies, each doomed" gradually "grow[s] to death." The speaker and his
 family have witnessed the rise and decline of the family and the senility of

their country, even “bled” for it while the roses in the course of time “sag,” become withered and discarded, a mirror of his father’s blindness, silence, and being deserted by his own mother country in the end. So, for the speaker even though the rose is dying it has been transformed into another undying state like the stone that the speaker compares himself to: “I, / the flawed stone, saw you dying / and revived you. I saw you / dying and called you mine. / I named you each day you remained: / Scorn, Banish, Grieve, Forgive, Love.” Hence the names that the speaker gives to the rose exactly manifest the familial and Chinese history of exile and the core values that Lee is hoping to achieve—the shapeliness of the rose, life and death, and the completed poem.

Besides, the speaker’s eating of the rose might suggest he has internalised the complicated familial and personal history as well as the powerful father-son bond, converting it to a state of “nakedness,” which is close to what Lee terms “final shapeliness.” But even though the rose has been sublimated, it still holds its ambivalent qualities: “sweet / to my nose, and bitter / to my tongue.” The ambivalent qualities reveal the condition of the speaker and his father: “among / the dying things,” a state in-between life and death, an elegiac code foreshadowing the mind of the universe of both “you and I.” The

universe mind is what poets see with their poetic consciousness, according to Lee, and it is “the whole consciousness speaking” (Lee 2006: 78) as the poem illustrates:

If with my mouth,
 if with my clumsy tongue, my teeth,
 if with my voice, my voice
 of little girl, of man, of blood, and if
 with blood, if with marrow, if with groin, lungs,
 if with breath bristling with animal and vegetable, if with all
 the beast in me, all the beauty,
 I form one word,
 then another, one
 word
 for every moment
 which passes, and if I do so until
 all words are spoken, then
 begin again,
 if I adore you, Rose
 with adoration become nonsense become
 praise, could I stop our dying?
 Could we sit together in new bodies, shoulder to tender shoulder,
 the lovely and the thorned, the bitter and the failed,
 the grave to the left of us, the sea to the right?
 Could you rise and stand and bear
 the weight of all the names I would give you?
 Cup of Blood, Old Wrath, Heart O' Mine, Ancient of Days,
 Whorl, World, Word.
 O day, come! (Lee 1986: 43-44)

The images of eating the rose appear quite violent when “mouth,” “tongue,” and “teeth” are involved. The “clumsy tongue,” in particular, may refer to the

Chinese language that has been seldom used by Lee since in exile except when talking to his mother after his father's death as well as the English language that is still unfamiliar to a non-native speaker of English when first immigrating to the U.S.A. So "with [his] clumsy tongue," the speaker attempts to blend his two cultural upbringings in his mouth and utters the history of an exile in "voice / of little girl, of man, of blood," making the personal a collective experience and vice versa. Taking in the rose means to ingest "all the beast" and "all the beauty" and then "form one word, / then another, one / word / for every moment / which passes." By forming the word for every past moment Lee gets to record the truth within the larger presence. The rose, therefore, is the key word that he employs as the representation of the truest thing. He hopes to stop the dying of the rose, his father, as well as the speaker himself by means of adoration and praise of the symbolic rose. The "new bodies" that the speaker, his father, and the rose are looking for are "the authentic body," as Lee calls it (Lee 2006: 98) and the authentic body is the result of the practice of art which produces the "final shapeliness" and our "original identity." "Our original identity," as Lee says elsewhere, "is that universe mind" (Lee 2006: 84).

The lyric "I" speaks to the rose "among / the dying things" with "the grave

to the left of [them], the sea to the right” and asks “Could you rise and stand and bear / the weight of all the names I would give you?” That inquiry indicates the speaker’s wish to see the rose revive as if he would love to see his father resurrect from the dead, and obtain his lost cultural identity. Despite the belief that a person has a manifold existence beyond this life, the poem expresses Lee’s hope to have his father back from the dead alive with him. Those crucial words regarding “stop our dying,” “new bodies,” and “rise and stand” have much to do with the idea of resurrection, which counters the ways Ramazani defines modern elegy: “Instead of resurrecting the dead in some substitute, instead of curing themselves through displacement, modern elegists ‘practice losing farther, losing faster’” (Ramazani 1994: 4). In this sense I would like to argue that Lee’s poems incorporate both the features of traditional and modern elegy, not simply overriding remorse and grief by praising the deceased but also “eating” and degrading the dying/dead, not merely resurrecting the dead by finding a replacement but also keeping the dead “doomed” and “profane” without healing the living. In brief, Lee has created a distinct genre of modern elegy expressing mourning over his father and his expectation of the final shapeliness of life, as he declares in this poem, “in words”:

Always a rose,
 in prayer and in fever,
 in the sun and in the den.
 Always that doomed, profane flower, that vertical flame
 darkens my arrivals, announces my departures,
 and sweetens my dying.
 Always the blackening, the bruising, the late fragrance,
 the opening to fullness and toward death.
 Always a rose ready
 to spill its petals, so that I must pluck
 each of them, or crush
 the whole thing in my fist.
 Or I must cup it
 in my hands, adore it,
 in silence,
 or, more often,
 in words. (Lee 1986: 38)

In Quest of Otherness

In addition to the shapeliness that I have discussed, Lee is also in pursuit of otherness. In commenting on the poem “The City in Which I Love you” Lee declares:

I started out to write a love poem. I think there is kind of love for a specific other, which becomes so intense that it transforms itself into a love for a greater other. You want so much to locate the core of the other that as you begin penetrating into the other you begin realizing that what you’re really after is the great other in each and

every one of us.” (Lee 2006: 50)

Lee believes that every one of us has a dimension which might be unknown to us as the otherness and that othered side of us gets us to make sense of the greater other, the larger presence. In many of his poems we can see Lee's commitment to explore the otherness in himself as well as people. “Furious Versions,” “The Cleaving,” and “The City in Which I Love You” are instances of that search for the otherness.

Before looking at these significant poems, I want to draw upon the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose thinking turns upon reflections on “the Other” and otherness. The idea of “the Other”/“face” occupies a large proportion of Levinas's thoughts. It not merely includes the otherness of the Other but also reveals itself as the Other. In other words, the face and the Other have things in common. Because of their infinity, transcendence, and exteriority, the face and the Other have managed to resist the “graspable possession” of the “I,” or the Same. In Lee's “The Cleaving” the face surely is “ungraspable” for it appears in an epiphanic moment when it transcends chronologically from the Shang dynasty of ancient Chinese government to the modern age; it traverses across geographical borders from East to West, from Asia to Africa, from the Cambodian rain forest to the

Arabian desert. Hence, vision of the face is neither a direct relationship with it nor a proper way to define or locate it. The indirect relationship with the object, the face, is like when I see an object but cannot see the light; it is because “light conditions the relations between data; it makes possible the signification of objects that border one another” (Levinas 1969: 191). So, to see and comprehend the face, according to Levinas, consists in seeing the being of light beyond this object and recognizing

the structures of vision, where the relation of the subject with the object is subordinated to the relation of the object with the void of openness, which is not an object. The comprehension of an existent consists in precisely going beyond the existent, into the open. To comprehend the particular being is to apprehend it out of an illuminated site it does not fill. (Levinas 1969: 189-90).

In the above passage we see the congruity between the thoughts of Lee and Levinas. Lee’s idea of a larger presence beyond this presence resembles Levinas’s “void of openness.” There must be some greater “presence/openness” beyond the existent butcher’s face in “The Cleaving” so that it is mutable and forms signification by itself, without being given by the “I.” As a consequence, the comprehension of the existent being consists in seeing beyond this existent presence, which explains why the speaker in “The

Cleaving” perceives in the butcher’s face many other recurrences of different faces emerging from beyond. In the epiphanic moment of emergence of the face the lyric “I” thus grasps the otherness of the (butcher’s/others’) face.

Levinas in conversation with Philippe Nemo refutes “a ‘phenomenology’ of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So, too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception” (Levinas 1985: 85). He elaborates on his conception of the face:

I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. [...] The face is signification, and signification without context. I mean that the Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a character within a context. [...] And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context: the meaning of something is in its relation to another thing. Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. [...] it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond. (Levinas 1985: 85-87)

Therefore, Lee’s speaker’s portrayal of “such a sorrowful Chinese face, / nomad, Gobi, Northern / in its boniness / clear from the high / warlike forehead / to the sheer edge of the jaw” should not be viewed as reduced to a

sketch of perception in this phenomenological world but the self-revelation of the face as well as the “mirroring” of the lyric “I.” In the epiphanic revelation of the face the lyric “I” sees the immediate reflection of himself, which Levinas calls “face to face” (Levinas 1969: 52). As the speaker speaks of “this man with my face,” this not only offers an immediate display of “face to face” but expresses a “double-consciousness” that is working on the lyric “I.” W. E. B. Du Bois explains his own idea of double-consciousness as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois xiii). In this regard, we could apply Du Bois’s theory and say the lyric “I” looks at himself through the eyes of the face/Other, feeling his doubleness—an American soul and a Chinese one in one yellow body—as two unreconciled strivings when he watches this man with his own face chopping roast pork and ducks in a grocery shop in the U.S. In contrast to the objects that are sublated by the totality, or the faces depicted in Johnny Lorenz’s discussion as “circulating texts that others read and to which they assign their own meanings, meanings generated with the

interpretative tools of desire, resentment, recognition, or racist reductions” (Lorenz 158), the butcher’s face is “present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched—for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content” (Levinas 1969: 194). It thus cannot be approached by visual or tactile senses but reveals signification all by itself without context. This Chinese face refuses to be incorporated and can only be approached via face to face by the “I” in mainstream society.

This “face to face” approach is in effect a kind of the “visible invisibility” discussed by Adriaan Peperzak when he interprets Levinas’s notion of face. Peperzak thinks that the uncontainable meaning of the face forms alterity, i.e. transcendence and infinity, which is paradoxical and transcends the vision of “I”:

Starting from a phenomenological perspective, I perceive (without perceiving) one phenomenon (which is not a phenomenon) that manifests (without manifesting) a visible invisibility: the face of another man, woman, or child presents me with a reality that is not a possible moment of the totality constituted by the world and its parts. The Other, in the sense of *Autrui*, does not fit into my consciousness; it breaks through my circular or elliptic horizon, thus revealing his/her transcendence. As transcendent, the Other

responds to the desire that opens my interiority to an absolute exteriority. The Other is, thus, the epiphany of a transcendent otherness or absoluteness. (Peperzak 1997: 32)

Because Levinas endows the face/Other with the property of invisibility, it becomes paradoxically both seemingly visible and literally invisible. And owing to the visible invisibility of the face, it can break through the vision of the “I” and transcends the integration of the Same. The face is not the object that “I” can prescribe meanings to; it generates meanings all by itself. For this reason, the relationship between the face and “I” is asymmetrical. The access to the face is face to face, which is also a manner to resist the power of “I.” By means of emphasizing the asymmetrical relation between the Other and “I” Levinas maintains absolute otherness and transcendence of the Other, which can be understood from the dimension of height as “the Most-High” (Levinas 1969: 34). That is to say, the Other is more elevated than “I.” It is because of the higher rank of the Other that “I” is responsible for responding to the interpellation and order of the Other.

Apart from responding to the order of the Other, the “transcendent otherness or absoluteness” that the poet aspires to quest for is observed through his own migratory experiences. His experiences of familial displacement since childhood have much to do with the search for otherness

because during the process of exile and assimilation the loss of a stable, continuous cultural identity has pressured him to reflect upon who he is. His characterisation of the face as “a sorrowful Chinese face, / nomad, Gobi, Northern / in its boniness” not only brings forth the idea of a life of displacements but also sketches the figure of the nomad, a figure of increasing interest to modern thinking. Rosi Braidotti has put the nomad and the nomadic at the heart of a series of important theoretical studies of contemporary global capitalist society, including *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994) and *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (2004). In an essay reflecting on her thinking in these books, “Writing as a Nomadic Subject,” Braidotti says:

By acknowledging the constitutive presence of otherness within and all around the self, writing enacts the destitution of unitary visions of the subject as an autonomous entity. The tactics of resistance and the ethical approach are not only mutually compatible but also inter-linked. On both counts, the nomadic writer does not relate to language merely as a tool of critical analysis and rational political intervention, but rather feels inhabited by it as an ‘other within’.
(Braidotti 2014: 165-6)

Again, as with Bhabha, Lee might not align himself with such a theoretical take on the nomad or “otherness,” but as a writer with his own experience of

nomadism he is surely aware of the “presence of otherness within and around the self,” however differently he frames this. As someone who has experienced multiple displacements, migrations, and forms of exile and homecoming, his own construction of “a sorrowful face” that is “nomad,” associates his project with the complex global imaginaries and counter-imaginaries discussed by Braidotti and others. In the same essay, Braidotti argues that “Creativity is a ‘matter-realist’ nomadic process in that it entails the active displacement of dominant formations of identity, memory and identification so as to open them up to that roar that lies on the other side of silence [a phrase she quotes from George Eliot]” (Braidotti 2014: 170). Developing this idea, she situates this view of writing in the larger theoretical context of post-Derridean theory:

The point is not just mere deconstruction, but the relocation of identities on new grounds that account for multiple belongings, ie: a non-unitary vision of a subject. This subject actively yearns for and constructs itself in complex and internally contradictory webs of social relations. To account for these we need to look at the internal forms of thought that privilege processes rather than essences and transformations, rather than counter-claims to identity. The sociological intersectional variables (gender, class, race and ethnicity, age, health) need to be supplemented by a theory of the subject that calls into question the inner fibres of the self. These include the desire, the ability and the courage to sustain multiple belongings in a context, which celebrates and rewards Sameness, cultural

essentialism and one-way thinking. (Braidotti 2014: 181)

Lee's work moves between cultural spaces, and as it does so, surely questions "the inner fibres of the self," though in quite different terms. Migration is a complex fate, and generates complex figurations of displacement.

In the series of poems being discussed here the poet refers frequently to the experience of being a diasporic subject, disclosing his bitter personal and familial history. We see this in "Furious Versions":

I hear
interrogation in vague tongues.
I hear ocean sounds and a history of rain.
Somewhere a streetlamp,
and my brother never coming.
Somewhere a handful of hair and a lost box of letters.
And everywhere, fire,
corridors of fire, brick and barbed wire. (Lee 1990: 17)

For the Lee family it is as if they have been driven to a hell of fire, where "it was one year of fire," "mid-century fire," "napalm-dressed and skull-hung fire, / and imminent fire" (Lee 1990: 18). Obviously, the poet uses the repetition of the image of fire to emphasize the scorching and even charring experiences in their exile. In order to manifest the sense of reality, though the speaker is narrating in the light of his memory, Lee uses the present tense of the verbs in

many passages. He even exclaims: “these are not drafts / toward a future form, but / furious versions / of the here and now...” (Lee 1990: 19). This shows his anger when recalling the unbearable past, which is still in some sense “here and now.” His reference to “interrogation in vague tongues” presumably refers to numerous political and judicial interrogations experienced by refugees and migrants, but also situates the poem within the global, migratory, nomadic conditions of modernity described by Braidotti, as “the history of rain” reminds us of other kinds of history, marked by the politics of borders and incarceration represented by “brick and barbed wire.”

In “Furious Versions,” the speaker describes the family’s wandering trans-global trip as “republic to republic, / oligarchy to anarchy to democracy” (Lee 1990: 23), indicating the repetitious and arduous labour and border-crossing they have been through as well as

hundreds of miles from sea,
 unless you count
 my memory, my traverse
 of sea one way to here.
 I’m like my landlocked poplars: far
 from water, I’m full of the sound of water” (Lee 1990:25).

“The sound of water” measures the different political geographies they pass

through and becomes the source of the speaker's story-telling. The ocean figures as the vast body that forms an immense fracture between their memory of the native land and foreign land but also brings them safely to the other shore away from political upheavals. "We arrived" (Lee 1990: 23), the speaker says, and then goes on:

But I own a human story,
 whose very telling
 remarks loss.
 The characters survive through the telling,
 the teller survives
 by his telling; by his voice
 brinking silence does he survive.
 But, no one
 can tell without cease
 our human
 story, and so we
 lose, lose. (Lee 1990: 26)

The loss of the speaker's cultural identity and history is mediated through the telling of the story. This enables the characters in the story to survive. The words "telling" and "survive" are used thrice each in this stanza to lay stress on the speaker's strategic survival on the strength of telling "a human story." The repetition of "telling" the story might be, according to Cathy Caruth, the "literality" of the event and "nonsymbolic nature of traumatic dreams and

flashbacks, which resist cure to the extent that they remain, precisely, literal” (Caruth 5). In this sense, “the sound of water,” which fills the speaker in his coerced exile, operates as a flashback. Such flashbacks, according to trauma theory, are signs of traumatic repression of the literality of its “insistent return” (5). The insistent return of the sound of water and telling result from the speaker’s “traverse of sea” that is “hundreds of miles,” and thus relates to what Caruth speaks of “an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event. It is indeed this truth of traumatic experience that forms the center of its pathology or symptoms; it is [...] a symptom of history” (ibid.; *italic original*). This history of the speaker’s exile indeed has traumatized him as is revealed by the insistent flashbacks of the water. The telling of the “human story” not only “remarks loss” (comments on loss) but also “re-marks” loss as a ritual of mourning over it. For Lee the remembering and retelling of the familial story is one of the ways to bring the dead back alive in a metaphorical sense, which is also one of the goals that his “waiting” means to attain. Thus, he continues to assert:

But I’ll not widow the world.
 I’ll tell my human
 tale, tell it against
 the current of that vaster, that

inhuman telling.
 I'll measure time by losses and destructions.
 Because the world
 is so rich in detail, all of it so frail;
 because all I love is imperfect;
 because my memory's flaw
 isn't in retention but organization;
 because no one asked. (Lee 1990: 27)

“Telling the human tale” is the way that the speaker employs to confront the attack of the oppressor's inhuman treatment, which caused the “losses and destructions” of the speaker and many other political underdogs.

Hence for the speaker, one of the family members of the victims under Chinese and Indonesian political conflicts,

The past
 doesn't fall away, the past
 joins the greater
 telling, and is.
 At times its theme seems
 murky, other times clear. Always,
 death is a phrase, but just
 a phrase, since nothing is ever
 lost, and lives
 are fulfilled by subsequence.
 Listen, you can hear it: indescribable,
 neither grief nor joy, neither mine nor yours.... (Lee 1990: 26-27)

Because “the past / joins the greater / telling, and is” and because “Always, /

death is a phrase, but just / a phrase” and “since nothing is ever / lost, and lives / are fulfilled by subsequence,” we come to realise that the larger presence that Lee has conjured in the poems not only includes the past but also supports “subsequence,” or what we call continuity or sustainability. In other words, the “subsequence” of “telling my human / tale” in terms of that nomadic “sound of water,” “losses and destructions,” and even death, turns out to “join the greater / telling, and is.” “Nothing is ever / lost” because there are manifold presences of life and death in Lee’s conception of larger presence, or Levinas’s theory of “the greater other.” Put things simply, life carries on in another form in the larger presence on Lee’s universe mind. In this regard, a sense of resurrection turns up again in contrast to the characteristics of modern elegy according to Ramazani.

As a matter of fact, Lee projects his own uniquely elegiac vision of loss, the past, and death, in exile as well as in a hallucinatory poetic epiphany:

America, where, in Chicago, Little Chinatown,
 who should I see
 on the corner of Argyle and Broadway
 but Li Bai and Du Fu, those two
 poets of the wanderer’s heart.
 Folding paper boats,
 they sent them swirling
 down little rivers of gutter water.

Gold-toothed, cigarettes rolled in their sleeves,
 They noted my dumb surprise:
What did you expect? Where else should we be?
 (Lee 1990: 23-24)

The image of water and river here resolves the pain of loss, the past, and death because the water/river carries the poem, a field full of energy and vibrations, forming part of the larger presence. According to Lee, great poets such as Li Bai (also known as Li Po) and Du Fu (or Tu Fu) in the Tang Dynasty in ancient China used to write poems on pieces of paper and then fold them up into small boats and send them down the river. In Lee's Taoist view, the poems written and folded into small boats are "a field of carefully negotiated harmonies and disharmonies and tensions and resolutions; it's in the world, whether or not it gets published or seen" (Lee 2006: 105). The poem here imagines the poets as survivors and poems as instruments of survival. By means of retelling and recalling the two ancient Chinese poets, the otherness of the lyric "I" as an exiled Chinese immigrant in America is found and founded. Accordingly, the loss, the past, and the death become essential elements of the speaker's otherness like paper boats that carry the desired to the infinity. "Memories revises me" offers a brilliant annotation to this "Furious Versions" (Lee 1990: 14). The paper boats, as a consequence, are metaphysical and metaphorical

images of the poetic survival of Chinese poets in America.

The survival of the poet and his family carried by the (paper) boat across the “gutter water”/ocean prompts him to think about the atrocity of murder, as well as the experiences of assimilation. Lee once said, “I think living in America is a violent experience, especially if you do feel like the other. And I think assimilation is a *violent* experience. One of violence’s names is change” (Lee 2006: 54; italic original). In one of his most intensely elegiac poems, his awareness of the violence felt in the progress of migration and assimilation comes into view “in an epiphanic moment” (Greenbaum 418). In “The Cleaving,” Lee describes a butcher and the speaker who stands in a Chinese grocery shop in the U.S. ordering roast duck:

He gossips like my grandmother, this man
 with my face, and I could stand
 amused all afternoon
 in the Hon Kee Grocery,
 amid hanging meats he
 chops: roast pork cut
 from a hog hung
 by nose and shoulders,
 her entire skin burnt
 crisp, flesh I know
 to be sweet,
 her shinning
 face grinning
 up at ducks

dangling single file,
 each pierced by black
 hooks through breast, bill,
 and steaming from a hole
 stitched shut at the ass.
 I step to the counter, recite,
 and he, without even slightly
 varying the rhythm of his current confession or harangue,
 scribbles my order on a greasy receipt,
 and chop it up quick. (Lee 1990: 77)

Lee clearly demonstrates his thematic concerns and technical strategies in the opening stanza of the poem, with its appalling images. He launches the poem with the man with “my/his” face and also concludes it with a man with varieties of faces including “his/my” own face. The first-person narrative throughout the poem might give the reader a false impression that this is a very self-centred poem about the apparent savageness of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. in the eyes of a white American while on the contrary the use of the lyric “I” could be more than that. It could be regarded as any possible immigrant face embodying the otherness and waiting to be recognized. In effect, the lyric “I” finds its reflection in the face of the butcher, which is

such a sorrowful Chinese face,
 nomad, Gobi, Northern
 in its boniness
 clear from the high

warlike forehead
to the sheer edge of the jaw. (Lee 1990: 77-78)

The nomadic persona “I” further infers the reflection of “my” face in the butcher, assuming “He could be my brother, but finer, [...] In his light-handed calligraphy / on receipts and in his / moodiness, he is / a Southerner from a river-province; / suited for scholarship, his face poised / above an open book, he’d mumble / his favorite passages” and “He could be my grandfather; / come to America to get a Western education / in 1917, but too homesick to study, / he sits in the park all day, reading poems / and writing letters to his mother” (78). Lorenz also suggests this reflection is a kind of “mirroring” and thus “such a sorrowful Chinese face, / nomad” absolutely corresponds to Lorenz’s idea that “a face works nevertheless as a sign, a sign of shared dislocations and re-locations, a sign of probable empathy” (158). In this sense Lee re-imagines and re-constructs the face of his ancestry and kinship in the imaginary homeland in which he was not born, but also establishes a new nomadic identity, in solidarity with other nomadic and migrant figures.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the closing stanza of the poem also highlights the face of the lyric “I”, its metamorphoses through different cultures and ethnicities:

The terror the butcher
 scripts in the unhealed
 air, the sorrow of his Shang
 dynasty face,
 African face with slit eyes. He is
 my sister, this
 beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite,
 keeper of sabbaths, diviner
 of holy texts, this dark
 dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one
 with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese
 I daily face,
 this immigrant,
 this man with my own face. (Lee 1990: 86-87)

The face of the butcher appears in the form of an epiphany and reveals itself to the lyric “I” as the face of numerous races. It could be discussed in the numerous different contexts of Levinas’s idea of the face. Levinas proposes that the face emerges in the form of epiphany but the face cannot be described by simply seeing or vision because “vision is not a transcendence. It ascribes a signification by the *relation* it makes possible. [...] It does not enable one to approach them face to face. [...] To see is hence always to see on the horizon. The vision that apprehends on the horizon does not encounter a being out of what is beyond all being” (Levinas 1969: 191; *italic original*). To Levinas the face transcends the vision and circumscription of the “I” rather

than being integrated into the totality of traditional Western philosophy:

The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. This mutation can occur only by the opening of a new dimension. [...] The face, still a thing among things, breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it. This means concretely: the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge. (Levinas 1969: 197-98)

The resistance to the totality results from the negation and possession that “I” has toward the Other and thus results in an order uttered from the Other that “I” must comply with and be responsible for. The order that the Other gives to the “I” is “you shall not commit murder” (Levinas 1969: 199). According to Levinas, “this infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word” (ibid.; italic original).

The face emerges in an epiphanic moment as if a master speaking with an order to “I” and asking “I” to respond. Standing at the butcher’s stall, the speaker indeed encounters the Other face to face in that instant while the butcher is cleaving the roast duck:

The head, flung from the body, opens
 down the middle where the butcher
 cleanly halved it between
 the eyes, and I
 see, foetal-crouched
 inside the skull, the homunculus,
 gray brain grainy
 to eat.
 Did this animal, after all, at the moment
 its neck broke,
 image the way his executioner
 shrinks from his own death?
 [...]

Is this how I'll be found
 when judgement is passed, when names
 are called, when crimes are tallied?
 This is also how I looked before I tore my mother open.
 Is this how I presided over my century, is this how
 I regarded the murders?
 This is also how I prayed.
 Was it me in the Other
 I prayed to when I prayed?
 This too was how I slept, clutching my wife.
 Was it me in the other I loved
 when I loved another? (Lee 1990: 79)

The stark and bloody imagery of the cleaving exactly demonstrates the way
 Levinas depicts the face: "The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an
 act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill" (Levinas
 1985: 86). The face of the butcher is like Janus, a two-faced god in ancient
 Rome, doing the violent cleaving and inviting "I," by "imag[ing] the way his
 executioner / shrinks from his own death," to witness the brutal scene that "I"

had done to the Other, while in the meantime prohibiting “I” from murdering. The order and message that the butcher’s face sends out to the lyric “I” does move him to re-examine himself and call himself into question: “Was it me in the Other / I prayed to when I prayed? / Was it me in the other I loved / when I loved another?” Because the butcher’s face is “this man with ‘my’ own face,” which derives from “my” father and reminds the “I” of the violence of his father, and because the lyric “I” wonders whether “I” is in the Other, which is the object that “I” is looking at and aiming to tame, the speaker “I” could be the speaker’s father, who is a fierce, forceful, and fascinating father figure watching himself doing violence to his son, the poet.

From another angle, nevertheless, the lyric “I,” “whoever I may be, but as ‘a first person,’” turns into a person that the face “finds the resources to respond to the call” (Levinas 1985: 89). The face-to-face interaction between the butcher’s face and the speaker affirms the responsibility that “I” should take to answer his request and order. In this sense, the speaker who witnesses the violent scene could be the poet himself recalling his ferocious and stern father. The recalling of the violent memory is actually a resistance to narratives that would get over the violence and loss of the father and bring about catharsis. The refusal to let go of the lost loved and hated object, the

dead father, can be regarded as masochism: "The self-tormenting in melancholia, which is without doubt enjoyable, signifies, just like the corresponding phenomenon in obsessional neurosis, a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject's own self" (Freud 251). The self-punishment mindset might get the speaker to see the delusion in the educative cruelty of his father spanking him daily. The responsibility of the speaker for the father is therefore more decisive since their father-son bond is a link made more solid in the poet's lines over and over again. This link, whether the son tells of the father eulogistically or critically, is highlighted in the repeated telling of the past. As a consequence, the idea of the butcher's face in this poem is a revelation of a special otherness of Lee's mourning for his father.

Furthermore, it is a fusion of both conventional and modern elegy as it magnifies the aggressive violence of the butcher/father while on the other hand inflates the elegiac glorification by stressing the nourishing tenderness of the father/butcher that satiates the speaker's hunger.

In other words, violence is not the sole quality that the speaker observes from the butcher/father's face but also his tender delicacy manifested by his provision of nourishment to the speaker. According to Levinas, besides the

order given by the Other that compels the lyric “I” to respond to the face, the destituteness of the Other also implores “I” for response because: “The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as ‘You’ in a dimension of height. [...] His very epiphany consists in soliciting us by his destitution” (Levinas 1969: 75). The “foetal-crouched / inside the skull” in the poem admittedly manifests the nakedness of the face and hence arouses “my” feelings of destituteness and hunger:

The butcher sees me eye this delicacy.
 With a finger, he picks it
 out of the skull-cradle
 and offers it to me.
 I take it gingerly between my fingers
 and suck it down.
 I eat my man. (Lee 1990: 79-80)

At this moment the butcher’s cruelty of cleaving the roast duck converts into the nourishment that feeds the speaker. The feeling of destituteness and hunger is associated with the speaker’s loss of his father. Due to the gaze of supplication and demand from the butcher’s face, the lyric “I” has the responsibility to respond, which is an “authentic relationship” between the

two parties (Levinas 1985: 88). So, the speaker's claim to metaphorically "eat my man" is an extremely violent form of response and resistance. No violence is more serious than murder of the Other. Levinas explains the violence of murder:

Murder alone lays claims to *total negation*. Negation by labor and usage, like negation *by representation*, effect a grasp or a comprehension, rest on or aim at affirmation; they can. To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to *renounce comprehension* absolutely. [...] The alterity that is expressed in the face provides the unique 'matter' possible for total negation. [...] The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill. (Levinas 1969: 198; italic emphasis mine).

Levinas's pertinent account of murder accentuates the Same's total negation of the Other. The sometimes oppressive force of his father's love was not actually murderous but powerful enough to arouse intense resistance in the speaker. Levinas further points out that the face opposes "me" with his "very *unforeseeableness* of his reaction," which is precisely "the infinity of his transcendence" (Levinas 1969: 199; italic original). "The infinite," Levinas goes on, "paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent"

(ibid.). Lee's arrangement of the lyric "I" eating the man, I would argue, is a reversal of the power relationship between Levinas's "I" and the Other. The father figure is otherized and empowered, in Levinas's sense, and the lyric "I" is a representation of a son whose attitude toward his father is in intensely ambivalent struggle. The instant when the butcher "sees me eye this delicacy" is a gleam of contact between the fatherly Other and the "I." When "I" treats the homunculus face inside the skull with vehement devouring "I" gazes back at the fatherly face and conveys infinite resistance. That epiphanic gleam and gaze at the butcher's face is "something absolutely *other*" (ibid.; italic original). As a consequence, the delicacy and authority are seen in both the face of the "I" and the Other. The face gazes, implores, demands, resists, and speaks to "me" so "I" am obliged to respond.

As a matter of fact, this poem is packed with many more shocking images and violence of consuming and being consumed, of brutally chopping and devouring:

He lops the head off, chops
the neck of the duck
into six, slits
the body
open, groin
to breast, and drains

the scalding juices,
 then quarters the carcass
 with two fast hacks of the cleaver,
 old blade that has worn
 into the surface of the round
 foot-thick chop-block
 a scoop that cradles precisely the curved steel. (Lee 1990: 78-79)

Greenbaum argues that the speaker's "relationship to the butcher, to food, to the machinery of the body, and the interrelationship of all these elements, swirl about him and illuminate his relationship to his own soul and the soul of others" (Greenbaum 418). Therefore, verbs and nouns of violent peculiarity used here and throughout, including "chopping," "burning," "dangling," "piercing," "steaming," "stitching," "lopping," "slitting," "quartering," "hacks," "cleaver" and more mentioned in other stanzas such as "neck broke," "suck it down," "eat my man," "club," "gut," etc. (79-82), all refer to a brutal act of the butcher's cleaving, which is associated with the violence that the immigrants' souls might have received in their journey of migration, in life and in death. In this aspect I suggest the violence of being an other living in and assimilating to the U.S. is given prominence to show Lee's search for his own Chinese root and otherness. Shawn Wong comments on "The Cleaving" that "Lee focuses on his family's ancestral roots and the discovery and preservation of that knowledge feeds the soul and feeds the act of naming all those who

came before him” (Wong 391). The discovery and preservation of that knowledge of his Chineseness has been converted into daily acts such as the cleaving of meat and into characters and animals with different faces that emerge at the different stages of this poem and his life. The “shinning / face grinning” of the roast pork thus turns into a face mutilated by violence while in “total resistance to the grasp” with its “grinning” attitude defying possession. The butcher appears simultaneously to be both the totality, who wishes to violently murder, sublate and subsume the Other, as well as the Other, who, with a face misrepresented by the totality as a typical Chinese face, endeavours to transcend and express itself to be viewed and respected.

Commenting on the complicated relationships with the soul, the face, and all the elements “swirling” and “trafficking” around him, the speaker reckons violence plays a vital part in the formation of the conflict between the lyric “I” and the Other:

I thought the soul an airy thing.
 I did not know the soul
 is cleaved so that the soul might be restored.
 [...]
 In the trade of my soul’s shaping,
 he traffics in hews and hacks.

 No easy thing, violence.

One of its names? Change. Change
 resides in the embrace
 of the effaced and the effacer,
 in the covenant of the opened and the opener;
 the axe accomplishes it on the soul's axis.
 What then may I do
 but cleave to what cleaves me. (Lee 1990: 86)

Lee insinuates his concern about violence occurring between two parties owing to the asymmetrical power relationships, such as the immigrants and their host society. In fact, the process of assimilation resembles “the trade of [one’s] soul” and is likely to “traffic in hews and hacks,” which suggests that violence interflows and “traffics” between the two sides. Moreover, the violence causes “change,” which “resides in the embrace / of the effaced and the effacer, / in the covenant of the opened and the opener.” The pun on “axe” and “axis” is also a manifestation of the violence inscribing axis on the soul of both immigrants and the mainstream discourse. The axis demarcates “a poetics that resists social inscriptions of racial meanings on the bodily surfaces,” as Xiaojing Zhou contends (Zhou 2006: 25). “What then may I do / but cleave to what cleaves me” further elaborates “my” resistance and ambivalence in facing the condition of dislocation. Embedded in the pun on “cleave” and “cleave to,” the ambivalence of the exiled in search of their otherness is showcased as they ultimately have to “adhere to” that which

severs them. That is to say, the differences between cultures could be a violence that cleaves the immigrants but also that they cling to. No wonder Lee would lament with emotion that violence is not an easy thing and to mitigate the clash is to change. Through all ages as long as issues are associated with benefits, power, or reputation, race, class, gender or whatever, violence has always been inevitable. That change involves “the effaced and the effacer,” “the opened and the opener,” the eater and the eaten, the consumer and the consumed. And to change also requires violence so it is never an easy thing. To sum up, I suggest that in “The Cleaving” Lee attempts to represent us all as atrocious and murderous beings in the world. To change and to bring violence to an end, Lee reminds us that “All are beautiful by variety” (Lee 1990: 81). Zhou also comments on Lee’s notion of “beautiful variety”: “Rejecting purity, homogeneity, hierarchy, and totality, Lee celebrates diversity and individual uniqueness” (Zhou 2006: 56-57). The implication is that our relation with the Other is “straightaway ethical,” so we should learn to discover and appreciate the otherness of others and be responsible for the preservation of the knowledge of the Other as well as the change of inferior condition of the Other.

In his talk about the creation of the title poem of his collection *The City in*

Which I Love You (1986), Lee's words shed light on his belief in otherness in everyone else and the violence he has been through: "The poem was a little terrifying to write because finally in order to see everybody in myself and to see myself in everyone else I had to do violence to myself. [...] I realized there's only one kind of transcendence, a kind of violence, because I think living in America is a violent experience, especially if you do feel like the other" (Lee 2006: 54). Lee did not make unequivocal what violence he had done to himself but he makes violence recognizable throughout "The City in Which I Love You." He also makes his personal experience of exile and assimilation a communal sight and site worth paying close attention to:

And when, in the city in which I love you,
even my most excellent song goes unanswered,
and I mount the scabbed streets,
the long shouts of avenues,
and tunnel sunken night in search of you....

That I negotiate fog, bituminous
rain ringing like teeth into the beggar's tin,
or two men jackaling a third in some alley
weirdly lit by couch on fire, that I
drag my extinction in search of you....

Past the guarded schoolyards, the boarded-up churches, swastikaed
synagogues, defended houses of worship, past
newspapered windows of tenements, among the violated,
the prosecuted citizenry, throughout this

storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed
 city I call home, in which I am a guest.... (Lee 1990: 51)

The speaker begins his narrative with an “and,” which might imply that he is continuing a story that has been told earlier. To retain and sustain the story and keep it being told could be regarded as a way of embracing remembering his inheritance where memory and the loved object had been repressed and where the resistance to the catharsis of the loss could be addressed. Despite the fact that the poem appears to be a love poem because of its title and that Lee also confesses he started to write it as a love poem (Lee 2006: 50), the poem can be regarded as an elegy in terms of that resistance and as a quest poem in search of otherness.

Besides the narrative mode of continuing the memory of loss, the arresting alterity of the Other in this poem also stands out when Lee expounds that “God is a she” (Lee 2006: 48). The female God definitely subverts the stiff stereotype of a masculine God and inverts the power relationship between the self and God, in which the otherness of the “you” that I love counters conventional patriarchy. This confirms Lee’s intention to write this poem as a love poem because he thinks that “You want so much to locate the core of the other that as you begin penetrating into the other you begin realizing that

what you're really after is the great other in each and every one of us" (Lee 2006: 50). Therefore, Lee leads us to enter the other and locate the core of the other in which he seeks for the greater other in God, his father, himself, and everyone else.

The city here, I want to argue, is a symbolic place where its otherness is represented by a bombed-out metropolis. It is a phantasmagoric city collaged with dilapidated images and films of the two World Wars and other devastating warfare like Korean War and Vietnamese War as well as a postmodern city muddled by social and cultural inscriptions of "fog" and "bituminous rain." The images in this poem display the darkness of the city, which is like "Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn" in Eliot's "The Waste Land" (Eliot 2004: 63). The violence is embodied by the catastrophic scenes of "scabbed streets," "two men jackaling a third," "a couch on fire," "the guarded schoolyards," "the boarded-up churches," "swastikaed / synagogues," "defended houses of worship," "newspapered windows of tenements," "the violated, / the prosecuted citizenry," and so on. Yet because of that flame burning the couch some light is shed like Eliot's "winter dawn" on a part of the "storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed" and "fogged" city so that the speaker is able to have a clearer look at this city of heterogeneity.

Zhou notes that the city is “a space of heterogeneity where one encounters strangers, including the exiled, the persecuted, the impoverished from around the world” and it further “embodies the range of diverse populations and the challenges they pose to homogeneity” (Zhou 2006: 44). A variety of buildings, such as churches and synagogues, reveal the diverse populations in the city, in which the speaker deems himself as “one of the drab population / under fissured edifices, fractured / artifices” (Lee 1990: 52). His identification with the “drab population” and the repetitive declarations of the difference of “I” from she, he, and they—“that woman / was not me,” “that man was not me,” “he was not me,” “they are not me,” “none of them is me,” and “they are not me forever” (Lee 1990: 54-55)—emphasize the significance of multiplicity in a city that Lee aspires to quest for. Nonetheless, Braidotti pierces to the truth with her pertinent remarks:

In the contemporary political context, *difference* functions as a negative term indexed on a hierarchy of values governed by binary oppositions: it conveys power relations and structural patterns of exclusion at the national, regional, provincial, or even more local level. Like a historical process of sedimentation, or a progressive accumulation of toxins, the concept of difference has been poisoned and has become the equivalent of inferiority: to be different from means to be worth less than. (Braidotti 2011: 17; italic original)

To cleanse difference of negative charge and enhance the positivity of difference, Braidotti finds it important “to reset the concept of difference in the direction of a nomadic, nonhierarchical, multidirectional social and discursive practice of multiplicity” (ibid.).

In response to Tod Marshall’s query on whether the poem “The City” is more like a seventeenth-century’s lyric in search of spiritual recognition, or more of a modern quest poem, Lee approves the latter: “I feel a great affinity toward quest poetry and certainly a lot of affinity with Eliot’s quest, but I feel ultimately that that’s an arc, a trajectory that’s ancient as Homer. [...] it’s the realization of my identity and that identity as the universe. I am perfectly convinced that that’s what I am, the universe. [...] I feel I’m in the presence of universe mind; [...] it is manifold in consciousness” (Lee 2000b: 130).

When the poetic speaker looks at those strangers’ faces, he realizes epiphanically, by distinguishing “they are not me,” that the heterogeneity among populations in the city is the otherness that he is questing for. This realization corresponds to Levinas’s notion of infinity resisting totality: “the face to face is a final irreducible relation [...]; it makes possible the pluralism of society” (Levinas 1969: 291). The quest for the pluralism as an otherness inevitably has to cleave to some violence that cleaves the society and the

immigrants' mind. Associated with the violence, resistance, and ambivalence the speaker has undergone, and his persistent mourning for the lost loved object, whether it is his formidable dead father or a cultural diversity in the city/nation/world where he lives, the speaker's articulation of love for otherness is particularly poignant and should be seen, I suggest, as a modern quest elegy. The quest goes on as the work of mourning for the lost loved otherness is left unresolved in Lee's lines without endorsing evasion. Interestingly, contrary to the concept of melancholic ambivalence, Braidotti's nomadic thought

rejects melancholia in favor of the politics affirmation and mutual specification of self and other in sets of relations or assemblages. Central to the nomadic subject is the emphasis on the intimate connection between critique and creation. (Braidotti 2011: 6)

Apparently, Braidotti holds a more affirmative attitude toward the nomadic subject, embodied in Lee's lyric "I," than Ramazani's modern elegist thought. By means of his poetic critique and creation, Lee concretizes the nomadic subject in his poems. The nomadic subject "drags [his] extinction in search of you" and wanders "throughout this / storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed / city [he] calls home, in which [he is] a guest...." As Braidotti points out,

nomadic thought

invites us to rethink the structures and boundaries of the self by tackling the deeper conceptual roots of issues of identity. It is particularly important not to confuse the process of nomadic subjectivity with individualism or particularity. Whereas identity is a bounded, ego-indexed habit of fixing and capitalizing on one's selfhood, subjectivity is a socially mediated process of relations and negotiations with multiple others and with multilayered social structures. (Braidotti 2011: 3-4)

The long and the short of it is that the lyric "I" in Lee's poetry keeps in search of "you," the reification of the Other, Levinas's face, the god, and the god-like father figure, and thus during the process of relating to and negotiating with "multiple others," as Braidotti calls it, the nomadic subjectivity, rather than identity, comes into being.

Chapter 3

“Some Things Never Leave a Person”: Trans/Re-configuring Chin and Lee’s Linguistic Hybridity

The quotation of this chapter’s title comes from one line of Li-Young Lee’s widely discussed and acclaimed poem “Persimmons,” which metaphorizes the fruit to explore the speaker’s experience of learning English as a foreign language and to reclaim his memory of the relationship with his parents.

From this standpoint I will set out to probe into the linguistic density and hybridity of the two poets’ work, concentrating particularly on metaphor, that is, on how both poets’ uses of metaphor relate to the issues of displacement and family examined in the previous chapters, and on how metaphors in their poems transcend geopolitical boundaries and translate the contact zone between different cultural contexts.

Ramazani’s conjoining of the two disparate conceptions of the world—metaphor and postcoloniality—is highly suggestive and offers a useful point of entry of argument to this chapter. Having brilliantly analysed in detail the Indian poet A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry, Ramazani, in his critical book *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2001), thematizes the postcolonial condition of linguistic and cultural in-betweenness. He traces the etymology of the lexicon “metaphor” to its Greek source, formulating that

“‘metaphor’ metaphorizes semantic and hermeneutic change as spatial movement from one place to another, one ‘realm’ or ‘context’ to another. ‘*Phora*,’ as Paul Ricoeur points out, ‘is a kind of change, namely change with respect to location’; ‘the *epiphora* of a word is described as a sort of displacement, a movement ‘from...to...’” (Ramazani 2001: 72; italics original). In this regard, both of the seemingly disjunct ideas are associated in terms of movement and dislocation. In the process of the translocation of the diasporic subjects from one place to another as well as the transposition of the meaning of the lexicon in poetry, Asian American poets make the transaction between contexts come into force at the confluent point, giving rise to a distinctive hybridity of metaphor and a sense of postcolonial complexity. In other words, I would like to look into the poems of Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee by examining how they employ metaphors in the context of postcoloniality, which gives a sense of agency and turns into a principal discursive site, to splice discordant rhetoric, literary, cultural, and disciplinary perspectives.

The idea that metaphor has something in common with postcoloniality also reveals another proclivity—penetrability, which is exemplified in the transnational, transtemporal, and translingual uses of metaphor in poetry.

Continually oscillating back and forth between different socio-geo-political and cultural borderlands, transnational poets who employ metaphors split the conventionally framed vision, penetrating and breaking the versatile forms of linguistic terrains. As Ramazani argues for the reconceptualization of the twentieth- and twenty-first-poetry in his *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), where he maintains that the transnational poetics

proposes various ways of vivifying circuits of poetic connection and dialogue across political and geographic borders and even hemispheres, of examining cross-cultural and cross-national exchanges, and confluences in poetry. It deploys, in approximate order of their appearance, a variety of transnational templates—globalization, migration, travel, genre, influence, modernity, decolonization, and diaspora—to indicate the many ways in which modern and contemporary poetry in English overflows national borders, exceeding the scope of national literary paradigms. (Ramazani 2009: x-xi)

Marilyn Chin has claimed that “as someone coming from two rich cultural histories, I want to play with more Asian forms and with hybridity” (Chin 2010: 142), while Li-Young Lee has lamented his own and his father’s linguistically ambivalent condition in “Rain Diary” where he talks of “this America and a divided tongue” (Lee 1986: 60). As “transnational poets,” Chin and Lee draw on all these “transnational templates” to accelerate those

“cross-cultural and cross-national exchanges, and confluences in poetry.”

Chin explicitly links her sense of poetry itself with translation:

Translation is a wonderful skill. I would not be the poet I am today had it not been for my translation training. This includes my bilingual skills as a kid—I had to negotiate for my grandmother and mother in the world, because they couldn’t speak English. Very young I had to translate every classical phrase that my grandmother hurled at me. I majored in Chinese literature as an undergraduate and I tried to translate Tang poetry and learned a lot about how Chinese imagery was constructed and carried that knowledge into my own work. Even today, I carry a book of Tang poetry with me at all times. I tell my students that it’s important to read poetry in a second language. It makes you understand language in a very intense and focused way. (Chin 2002c)

Chin’s comments on translation not only narrate her personal linguistic upbringing, defining her role as a translator between generations, languages, and cultures, but also reiterate the shared immigrant poets’ experiences of communicating between different linguistic contexts: this highlights the translatable role that her languages in the poetry plays. She pitches her claims high, speaking not only about her linguistic negotiations with and for her mother and grandmother as a child, but the founding relationship between her poetry and her bi-lingual, dual-cultural inheritance: “I would not be the poet I am today had it not been for my translation training.” I want to

explore the ways how the multitudinously strewn linguistic and figurative devices in Chin and Lee's poetry come into play with their polyglot hybridity and penetrate each monoglot ideology, establishing an alternative point of view to look at Asian American poetry.

In addition, I would like to incorporate the notion of mourning into this analysis. This means that the poetic language can be transformed into an even more polyvalent location of cultural and linguistic hybridity, but shadowed with a sense of loss of many kinds. Since Ramazani points out that "dislocations of discourse, meaning, or culture from one context to another are fundamental to both the metaphorical sentence and the postcolonial text" (Ramazani 2001: 74), the idea of loss is ineluctable in the course of relocation, dislocation, as well as translation. Different languages in the works of migrant poets of Asian origin such as Chin and Lee to some extent are a representation of different cultures mediated through poets' own understanding, so the loss of meaning, sound, and memory of their mother tongues cannot be emphasized enough when it comes to dislocation and translation. These migrant Asian poets in America thrive on English but their poetry is marked and haunted by loss due to their physical dislocation and sense of the absent language. Although Ramazani has elaborated the

concepts of hybridity, transnational poetics, and mourning respectively in three different monographs, this chapter attempts to amalgamate these important ideas and emphasize the dimension of linguistic loss in these poets' work in the context of modern elegy. I also want to show how their poetry resists displacing their libidinal attachment to the lost part of languages with other substitute languages, and then analyse how Chin and Lee immerse their poetry in both the Chinese and Western cultural contexts. Their distinctive fusion of languages in the poetry reenacts the work of melancholic mourning, as what Elizabeth Bishop calls an "art of losing."²² In the following I will endeavour to show how both poets lay the linguistic wound open within the context of transnational poetics and modern elegy.

Memory and Linguistic Loss

Both poets speak of their personal experiences of learning English while at the same time losing the mother tongue in poetry. I suggest this involves a powerful element of linguistic mourning. In "Persimmons" Lee speaks through the main character "I," recalling he had a hard time distinguishing

²² Bishop, "One Art," *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems*, 178.

“persimmon” from “precision” owing to their similar pronunciation and spelling:

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker
slapped the back of my head
and made me stand in the corner
for not knowing the difference
between persimmon and precision.
How to choose

Persimmons. This is precision. (Lee 1986: 17)

This very first stanza of the poem presents us with a primary school boy’s experience of violent corporal punishment, which involves the first person speaker being slapped and made to stand in the corner, simply because, in his teacher Mrs. Walker’s mind, he must be another poor immigrant’s kid who is incapable of pronouncing English words right, let alone knowing something about the rich history and profound knowledge of English. This scene brings out the charged cultural contact and violent linguistic conflict between a well-educated teacher in the U.S.A. and a student of immigrant background. A teacher, with her power of knowledge and speech, serving as a representative of authoritative figure of literacy, imposes her power on the schoolboy, a symbol of the “not knowing.” Mrs. Walker thinks she is superior to the “not

knowing” on account of the “difference” between the two words she is able to tell with “precision.” Though she can apparently tell the difference of the meaning and pronunciation of the two words, she can’t accept the difference turning up among her students.

The tension abruptly aggravates where there is a huge crevice between the sixth line and the seventh line. The run-on line—“How to choose / persimmons”—straightforward counterbalances that phonetic knowledge Mrs. Walker proudly has. The stresses falling on the three words “How to choose” prolong the cadence and the big gap even intensifies the sense of extended pace involved in “choos[ing] / persimmons.” That extended pace suggests it took a long time for the speaker to cultivate and acquire the know-how of “choos[ing] / persimmons,” something which can be seen as the speaker’s cultural heritage, part of his Asian identity formed before he and his family immigrated to America. Thereupon, the speaker confidently announces “This is precision” to indicate that his firsthand knowledge of actually consuming the fruit is on a par with Mrs. Walker’s phonetic knowledge. Though they are not entirely symmetrical with Hamlet’s universally known soliloquy “To be, or not to be, that is the question” (835), Lee’s lines “How to choose / persimmons. This is precision” share with Shakespeare’s a sense of

deja vu.

Before jumping to the conclusion of the arduous question they are faced with in their life, both speakers in “Persimmons” and *Hamlet* pause and ponder. Susan Howe has a poem which begins with “It is precision we have / to deal with” (137) and that happens to say that we need to deal with the issue of loss whether the life decision is made with precision or irresolution. That precision or irresolution probably is the biggest difference that distinguishes Hamlet’s soliloquy from that of the sixth-grade speaker in “Persimmons” for the latter possesses resolute “precision” without gnawing hesitation of the former. Besides, the enjambment between the sixth and seventh line also suggests a hybrid resonance of precision and irresolution reverberating in the valley with the readers’ as well as the speaker’s heartbeats, even though it looks absolutely blank and sounds like a silence in that void. In brief, the huge gap is pregnant with voices. It might imply that the speaker had been through a hard time figuring out his “precise” ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity since the initial years of difficult life in a foreign land compels him to “precisely” opt for his protogenic identity.

Lee’s difficulty in learning to speak English well is not his first frustrating experience, though. His personal history of linguistic acquisition can be

traced back to the very early phase of his life, as he describes his own condition through what a spectator observes in a third person's voice in "The Furious Versions":

He did not utter a sound his first three years,
and his parents frowned.
Then, on the first night of their first exile,
he spoke out in complete sentences,
a Malaysian so lovely it was true song.
But when he spoke again
it was plain, artless, and twenty years later. (Lee 1990: 27-28)

Twenty years of course is a hyperbolic way of describing the excessively unbearable hardship the speaker and his family had gone through, evoking a little boy's fear of facing dangers, of speaking out that fear, and of losing his father. According to Lee's own confession,

I had a problem speaking—maybe this contributes to poetry, I always like to think it does, at least to my poetry—I didn't say anything the first three years of my life. Then on the night of our escape, about three miles out of harbour, I spoke in complete sentences. I spoke for about fifteen minutes, nonstop, and then I stopped entirely. Since then I haven't spoken Indonesian. I think that says something about poetry. I like to think I was internalizing all that language. (Lee 2006: 20)

Lee was born after his father, a personal physician to Mao Zedong, had been

exiled from China to Indonesia due to political clashes and struggle. Not long after their settlement in Indonesia Lee's father was put into prison, a leper colony in reality, under the Sukarno regime when anti-Chinese sentiment raged. The fact that the poet barely could "utter a sound" or remained speechless for the first three years might imply his response to the traumatic dislocations of exile in those early years. When he was able to speak, he self-mockingly thinks what he said was as "plain" and "artless" as pronouncing "persimmon" and "precision." The "fifteen minutes" of speaking Indonesian "nonstop" and losing this language forever might suggest that the poet "internalizes" the loss, the trauma, and the history and then rebels against it because of the dark history and dismal experience he and his family had been through. The stanza above serves as a recalcitrant mourning for the loss of his very first foreign language. "I will measure time by losses and destructions," says Lee (1990: 27). The irony that links these two of his personal experiences is that Mrs. Walker was not aware of the history of the schoolboy she slapped. This young man not only knows how to choose persimmons precisely but also transplants the fruit onto his mind as well as his poems with artful dexterity.

Even though years have passed after they fled Indonesia and came to

America, the thrilling experience of Lee's early years still haunted him:

hundreds of miles from sea,
 unless you count
 my memory, my traverse
 of sea one way to here.
 I'm like my landlocked poplars: far
 from water, I'm full of the sound of water. (1990: 25)

Going through thousands of miles of "traverse" of sea and staying "hundreds of miles from sea" in the land of opportunity, Lee is well brimming with "the sound of water," the sound of memory, the sound of cultural heritage, and the sound of interrogation and weeping. On the one hand, Lee turns to two ancient famous Chinese poets for reclaiming linguistic inheritance:

America, where, in Chicago, Little Chinatown,
 who should I see
 on the corner of Argyle and Broadway
 but Li Bai and Du Fu, those two
 poets of the wanderer's heart. (1990:23)

On the other hand, even long after those miserable years of being in exile among southeast Asian countries and regions, "the sound of water" and interrogation remain the fountainhead of the language of his poems:

I hear
 interrogation in vague tongues.
 I hear ocean sounds and a history of rain.
 Somewhere a streetlamp,
 and my brother never coming.
 Somewhere a handful of hair and a lost box of letters.
 And everywhere, fire,
 corridors of fire, brick and barbed wire.
 Soldiers sweep the streets
 for my father. My mother
 hides him, haggard,
 in the closet.
 The booted ones herds us
 to the sea.
 Waves furl, boats
 and bodies drift out, farther out.
 My father holds my hand, he says,
Don't forget any of this.
 A short, bony-faced corporal
 asks politely, deferring to class,
What color suit, Professor, would you like
to be buried in? Brown or blue?
 A pistol butt turns my father's spit to blood.
 (1990: 17-18; italics original)

The bloody memory of those years mixed up with “interrogation in vague
 tongues,” “fire,” “wire,” “sea,” “bodies,” and missing families depicts the
 truthful experiences of loss and it definitely contributes to the formation of
 this poem as an elegy. As Lee claims in this long poem “Furious Version,”
 “Memory revises me” (14). His memory, as well as the language of his
 poetry, as a matter of fact, revises also the entire realm of Asian American

elegy. Moreover, Lee's ingenious and surreal yoking of many scenes in his memory has made this poem a site of postcolonial penetrability, power relationships, and cultural politics. How a person memorizes the past, rebuilds and reclaims the history reveals his/her demand for significance in the ongoing life.

"The Furious Version" exhibits how traumatic experiences of displacement and political struggle resulted in the aphasia of a three-year-old boy while "Persimmons" metaphorizes the linguistic hybridity of a schoolboy to a great extent. The speaker in "Persimmons" then gives a precise and expert exposition of how to choose persimmons precisely: "Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted. / Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one / will be fragrant" and that of properly

How to eat:
 put the knife away, lay down newspaper.
 Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.
 Chew the skin, suck it,
 and swallow. Now, eat
 the meat of the fruit,
 so sweet,
 all of it, to the heart. (Lee 1986: 17).

The subtle knowledge about choosing and eating persimmons that a sixth-

grader knows only too well comes very likely from his parents' instruction and passing it on. Thereupon the speaker's meticulous and respectful treatment of the persimmon can be understood as his careful preservation and application of the inherited knowledge and family food culture from seniors. That is to say, the speaker has consumed and internalized the inheritance "to the heart" and what's more, the poet hopes to recover this heritage from memory loss in the face of the struggle to create a poem to convey how to choose and eat persimmons. In this way the poem turns linguistic humiliation into linguistic mastery, showing Mrs. Walker's knowledge of phonics is merely partial and her standpoint is prejudiced.

On the contrary, the young speaker's familiarity with the anatomy of persimmons absolutely displays the confidence and precision of his knowledge deriving genetically, traditionally, and culturally from his mother. Lee represents an immigrant child's feeling of awkwardness in expressing himself in English while at the same time shows a conflict between the verbal expression and inner knowledge in the young speaker in the process of assimilation. Moreover, the poet's sophisticated analysis of how to choose a ripe persimmon and then how to eat it properly can be regarded as a way of looking at his mourning, exploring linguistic inability anatomically and

metaphorically. His knowledge of peeling the persimmon is like a surgeon doing an anatomical exam, revealing the connection and contrast between the fruit and the languages. The rhyming words of “meat,” “sweet,” and twofold “eat” lend the idea and act of eating a persimmon additional emphasis that he has grasped the essence of his eating manner “to the heart.” The sweetness and fragrance of the ripe persimmon are depicted in plain but alluring language and at the same time are transformed into an acerbity that is linked to the pain the speaker had received from Mrs. Walker’s slapping and from learning a foreign language as an exile student.

The poem suddenly shifts its focus from the school scene and fruit to an erotic setting in which the speaker is flirting and having sex with a girl:

Donna undresses, her stomach is white,
 In the yard, dewy and shivering
 with crickets, we lie naked,
 face-up, face-down.
 I teach her Chinese.
 Crickets: *chiu chiu*. Dew: I’ve forgotten.
 Naked: I’ve forgotten.
Ni, wo: you and me.
 I part her legs,
 remember to tell her
 she is beautiful as the moon. (Lee 1986: 17)

The abrupt change of subject from the persimmon to the teenagers’ audacious

sex in an open space reveals the stream of consciousness of the speaker as an adult recalling the childhood memory. Besides, the change also implies the young speaker was distracted by and attracted to fresh stuff and people in the adopted country and was keen to assimilate himself to the new culture by “part[ing] her legs” and merging himself with Donna, presumably a white girl. Interestingly enough, “Donna” is the name of Lee’s wife and Lee takes it as a symbol of American culture that an immigrant young man, who feels abased and shamefaced being slapped by a dominant and stern teacher at school, wants to bring to subjection in an alternative manner. However, the speaker has exoticized himself by teaching his date Chinese but ironically he has forgotten some of the basic phrases. His oblivion of Chinese vocabulary might indicate he is getting assimilated to the American culture while on the other hand he got punished by the English teacher for not being able to differentiate similar English vocabularies clearly. I suggest his linguistic ambivalence and in-betweenness embodies mourning for the loss of his mother tongue and for not gaining accurate and quick access to English.

The speaker then instances other words that dramatize comparable linguistic ambivalence:

Other words
 that got me into trouble were
fight and *fright*, *wren* and *yarn*.
 Fight was what I did when I was frightened,
 fright was what I felt when I was fighting.
 Wrens are small, plain birds,
 yarn is what one knits with.
 Wrens are soft as yarn.
 My mother made birds out of yarn.
 I loved to watch her tie the stuff;
 a bird, a rabbit, a wee man. (Lee 1986: 17-18)

The paired words “fright” and “fight,” “wren” and “yarn” have similar articulation and spelling as “precision” and “persimmon” do. The adult speaker, nevertheless, shows us now he can discriminate the denotation of these paired words precisely but also how language and experience complicate the difference. The precision signifies that misconstruction of similar lexicons was only momentary for a beginner of language learner and once he has lived long enough in the target language’s context it would be an easy task to tell these words apart like he does now. In addition, his precise depiction of the reaction to fight and the feeling of fright when fighting hints that the young speaker may have had experienced racial discrimination or school bullying in his childhood or teenage years. As a matter of fact, Lee has once stated the linguistic frustration and racial discrimination he had had when he first landed on America with his family: “I remember Seattle, Washington, the

first place we came to. I remember hearing a lot of ethnic slurs. I didn't understand them, of course, but later on as I picked up more and more English I knew they were ethnic slurs. The first phrase I learned in English was "Shut up," and that's the only thing I knew" (Lee 2006: 20). His personal experience developed a more precise understanding and use of the words that describe his emotional feelings of fright and fight when he picked them up. Having acquired this vocabulary reveals the speaker has been trying hard to adapt himself to the English context and also demonstrates that he has transposed his linguistic cognition from one language to another. The plangent sound of the rhymed pair of fright and fight conveys a solid mediation on that transfer between Chinese and English, on bittersweet memory and ironic association with the persimmon between past and present.

In contrast to Lee's disclosure of fright in a pregnant way, Marilyn Chin audaciously exclaims in the poem "Blues on Yellow," "If you cut my yellow wrists, I'll teach my yellow toes to write. / If you cut my yellow fists, I'll teach my yellow feet to fight" (2002a: 13). We could assume that both poets have ever gone through racial discrimination as a diasporic subject. It seems inevitable for every immigrant child to suffer the racist circumstances in the process of growing up. The idea of precision in English pronunciation in

“Persimmons” and emotional expression in “Blues on Yellow” displays the survival strategy of both poets. Chin even transfers her fear of loss of her Chinese heritage into her dynamic of writing poetry with modern elegiac language, turning her rage outward and toward the racist hegemony. Furthermore, the idea of precision in the above-mentioned stanza of “Persimmons” is even manifested in the knitted puppets made by the speaker’s mother. The precision required by handiwork is just as important as language and comprehension. Perhaps this provides a model for the poem’s careful knitting together of the different words that “got [him] into trouble.”

The confusion of the sound and spelling of English words has actually been translated in the mental operation of the speaker into the positive precision of understanding the meaning and its practical use, whether it is fighting or weaving. That translation foregrounds the contrast between the underevalued Chinese boy’s linguistic comprehension and a conceited schoolteacher’s ignorance:

Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class
and cut it up
so everyone could taste
a *Chinese apple*. Knowing
it wasn’t ripe or sweet, I didn’t eat

but watched the other faces.

My mother said every persimmon has a sun
inside, something golden, glowing,
warm as my face. (Lee 1986: 18; italic original)

Here Lee has ingeniously and thoroughly inverted “the other faces” to arbitrary and subjective “I” and at the same time completely converted “my face” into “the Other.” According to Levinas, when the Other and I are under the circumstance of face-to-face, the “I” has the responsibility of replying and hence the ethical relationships come into being. Lee masterly creates a situation of face to face between Mrs Walker, the class, and the speaker. Since the Other’s face is “something golden, glowing” like the sun, it reifies the infinity and transcendence of the Other. Levinas has made clear the concept of “transcendence as the idea of infinity” from the beginning of the schema of his theory of ethics (1969: 48). As Levinas expounds, the Other’s face “brings a notion of truth which, in contradistinction to contemporary ontology, is [...] *expression*: the existent breaks through all the envelopings and generalities of Being to spread out [...] finally abolishing the distinction between form and content” (1969: 51; italic original). Levinas further defines: “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression” (ibid.). In light of Levinas’s words, I would argue that “expression” could refer to both utterance

made to convey one's idea and the look on someone's face. Lee does not make the poetic speaker articulate any words in this scene but he makes his facial expression stand out by comparing his face to the sun. "It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity," as Levinas's explanation of the relationship between the Other and I perfectly annotates Lee's figurative device here (ibid.). "But this also means: to be taught," continues Levinas, "The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is [...] an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching" (ibid.) The expression of the poetic speaker (now I term it the Other) says everything about the persimmon and therefore he is teaching those ignorant "I"s how to distinguish the persimmon from a *Chinese apple* with precision. As Levinas elucidates more about teaching, "Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain" (ibid.). This offers a further interpretation of the infinity and transcendence of the Other, as embodied in the poetic speaker in Lee's "Persimmons."

In contrast to the rich cultural history and botanical knowledge that the speaker has, Mrs. Walker's ignorance is displayed by the blunders she makes about the persimmon. Neither does she have idea about how to select a ripe

persimmon nor should she cut it up instead of peeling it gingerly. What's worse, by calling the fruit a "Chinese apple" she has otherized and alienated the junior speaker, who might be the only Chinese face among other fellow students, and even harmed his self-esteem. By calling the fruit a "Chinese apple" the white female teacher has also injected the Chinese student and his cultural heritage with a sense of "thirdworldliness," as Ien Ang proposes in her *On Not Speaking Chinese* (23). Mrs Walker's act of "cutting up the Chinese apple" can also be seen as a white mainstream society trying to accommodate the immigrant minority but mistakenly and violently severed the cultural root of it. In other words, the white mainstream ideology would determine that the Chineseness of an immigrant is an imposed identity and that this inscribed identity is at the discretion of the white American society. The cause of the inevitability of the Otherized immigrant Chineseness could be ascribed to their yellowness, which is associated with the blackness and "corporeal malediction" termed by Franz Fanon (111). Consequently, the imposed identity of ethnic Chinese in America and their being stereotyped of linguistic inability in pronouncing words with precision are "the artificiality of national identity," which reveals "the relativeness of any sense of historical truth" (Ang 29).

This Chinese student's face is dauntless enough to rebuff his teacher's intentional "artificiality" of his otherness and to "[watch] the other faces," possibly scrunched up and looking at the Chinese boy with a glare, curiosity, and even disdain, wondering how this Chinese boy could endure such an unpalatable fruit. Installing two enjambments in the sentence, the poet highlights the reason why "I didn't eat"—it is because I "know" the secret. Besides, the word "Knowing" is made to stand out to contrast "the not knowing," which here refers to Mrs Walker and the other students. There is also a powerful contrast between the speaker's poised face "watch[ing] the other faces" and other school children's displeased and disparaging faces. The knowledge behind this fruit supports him to withstand the prejudiced judgment announced by the teacher and then accepted by the other students. Ramazani has commented on this dramatic and tensional scene: "The American teacher's belligerently ignorant blindness toward her Chinese immigrant student, her slapping him for not being able to pronounce the difference between 'persimmon' and 'precision', produces the friction out of which the speaker retrospectively leverages a poetic mastery of English, developing poetic connections between words that he was once punished for conflating" (Ramazani 2009: 18). Ramazani's commentary redeems the

gustatory and literary value of the persimmon as a metaphor by reaffirming the poet's superb poetic technique of conflating Eastern and Western linguistic mastery. The speaker then turns attention away from the classroom to the evocation of his mother's love. The very sweet and crisp heart of the ripe persimmon reminds him of his mother's tender heart like a sun inside the persimmon, "something golden, glowing." The speaker not only knows well botanically about the tissue of the persimmon but also represents the fruit its organic element because we see the sun that keeps the fruit growing and glowing and that keeps the speaker strong in the face of his early linguistic frustration in English. A persimmon definitely enables him to embody the memory of the two women that leave very important but completely different influence on him since he started learning English.

The poet continues to evoke his memory of father, who is without a doubt the most influential person in his life and who is reminiscent of the persimmon too because it is "heavy as sadness, / and sweet as love":

Once in the cellar, I found two wrapped in newspaper,
 forgotten and not yet ripe.
 I took them and set both on my bedroom windowsill,
 where each morning a cardinal
 sang, *The sun, the sun.*

Finally understanding
 he was going blind,
 my father sat up all one night
 waiting for a song, a ghost.
 I gave him the persimmons,
 swelled, heavy as sadness,
 and sweet as love.

This year, in the muddy lighting
 of my parents' cellar, I rummage, looking
 for something I lost.
 My father sits on the tired, wooden stairs,
 black cane between his knees,
 hand over hand, gripping the handle.
 He's so happy that I've come home.
 I ask how his eyes are, a stupid question.
All gone, he answers. (Lee 1986: 18-19)

The poet's use of the persimmon and the cardinal as a medium to metaphorize the father-son relationship, along with the language acquisition and life moral learning from his father, resonates with some other fruits and birds in his other poems. For example, in "The weight of sweetness," which was analysed in detail in the previous chapter, Lee relates the peach as a metaphor to mourn over the past and loss of his father: "See a peach bend / the branch and strain the stem until / it snaps. / Hold the peach, try the weight, sweetness / and death so round and snug / in your palm. / And, so, there is / the weight of memory" (Lee 1986: 20). Similar metaphorical instances can also be found in "Eating alone," where the speaker recalls the time he spent with his father

and spent alone after his father passed away:

I turn, a cardinal vanishes.
By the cellar door, I wash the onions,
then drink from the icy metal spigot.

Once, years back, I walked beside my father
among the windfall pears. I can't recall
our words. We may have strolled in silence. But
I still see him bend that way—left hand braced
on knee, creaky—to lift and hold to my
eye a rotten pear. In it, a hornet
spun crazily, glazed in slow, glistening juice. (Lee 1986: 33)

As the title of this poem suggests, Lee is lamenting the empty space on the dinner table because of his father's death, so the cardinal symbolizes his father, who "vanishes" in his eyesight when he is doing gardening collecting the onions he rears himself in his own yard but each morning the cardinal comes back and sings "*The sun, the sun.*" The explicit pun on the sun and the son produces an instant reference to the sweet heart of a ripe persimmon, the warmth of the speaker's mother, and more importantly, both the tender love and blistering cruelty of his father. The "windfall pears," like the peaches or the persimmons, represent the weight of parents' love and all immigrants' experiences of migration because they are "heavy as sadness, / and sweet as love." Once lost the father and sense of home, the speaker is like "a hornet /

spun crazily,” mourning for the rotten pears, and the decayed body of the father.

Two things before and after his father goes blind are related to the persimmons and may reveal that their father-son relationship has improved. When his father sat up waiting all night, the speaker accompanied him and gave him the persimmons with the sun/son inside to warm his palms and heart. The song his father was waiting for is exactly the cardinal singing “*The sun/son, the sun/son*” and this shows a father’s silent but strong love for his son. The Death is also what his father was waiting for as a ghost because he knows well that his entire wandering life is coming to an end with his eyes going blind. The cellar could be a metaphor for his father’s hidden side of mind as well as the dark side of his thought. So, when the speaker says “I rummage, looking / for something I lost” he is making an attempt to search for his father’s past as well as Father’s “glowing” love for children. The cellar is dark, and his father’s blindness makes his world and his life even darker, but having the “glowing” heart as his father does the speaker manages to see the “lighting” of Father’s inner psyche.

Another thing happens when the speaker is “looking / for something [he] lost” in the cellar and finds that his father is sitting on the old and shabby

stairs. The cellar here can also function as a place storing the speaker's memory, cultural heritage, Chinese linguistic root, and parents' love, embodied in the persimmons wrapped in newspaper, which are something meaningful that Lee endeavours to search for and recover throughout the poem and his own life. Though he strives to retrieve what has been lost, something lost like his father's eyesight is irretrievable no matter what the speaker has done, the now adult speaker could only "[walk]/sit beside [his] father" in the last miles/hours of the life, showing the filial piety toward his father:

Under some blankets, I find a box.
 Inside the box I find three scrolls.
 I sit beside him and untie
 three paintings by my father:
 Hibiscus leaf and a white flower.
 Two cats preening.
 Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.

He raises both hands to touch the cloth,
 Asks, *Which is this?*

This is persimmons, Father.

*Oh, the feel of the wolftail on the silk,
 the strength, the tense
 precision in the wrist.
 I painted them hundreds of times
 eyes closed. These I painted blind.*

*Some things never leave a person:
scent of the hair of one you love,
the texture of persimmons,
in your palm, the ripe weight.* (Lee 1986: 19)

Sitting beside his father and having a discussion with him about father's paintings of plants and animals on the cloth is a good way for the speaker to recollect and reclaim his lost Chinese cultural heritage and history. As Tim Engles points out, "The speaker has recovered two qualities embodied in and demonstrated by his parents that he has found lacking in American culture: the rich, full warmth of his parents' love, figured in persimmons, and their precise, caring ways, represented by their respective crafts" (192). Indeed, without his parents' attentive education and influence on himself Lee could not resurrect and maintain his Chinese heritage with precision. His parents' masterly craftsmanship and artistry are displayed in their work of yarn figurines and paintings, which require "the strength, the tense / precision in the wrist" and doing them "hundreds of times." Having reached such a high-end state of artistry the speaker's father remarks: "Some things never leave a person" because the skill has been internalized like an instinct through hundreds of practices.

The instinctive response to the precise control in the movement of the

wrist when painting the persimmons with his eyes closed or even blind alerts the speaker to the Chinese heritage in his father and himself. The “precision in the wrist” of a painter as well as the precision of choosing a ripe persimmon signify the cultural heritages that never leave the speaker. With his parents’ “precise” scholarly and artistic education, the poet gets to cultivate his artistic precision in poetic creations. Though the bodily signal of the wrist may not be as political and recalcitrant as those wrists in Marilyn Chin’s attestation: “If you cut my yellow wrists, I’ll teach my yellow toes to write” in “Blues on Yellow” (Chin 2002: 13), Lee ingeniously foregrounds the delicate “texture of persimmons” as “the feel of the wolftail on the silk,” weaving the painterly, tactile, textual, historical, linguistic, and familial fabric together and making the somatic and diasporic displacement manifest in such an exotic painting of “Chinese apples” on the poetic cloth. In addition, such intimate olfactory representation of the father-son relationship as “scent of the hair of one you love” is a negation of conventional elegiac codes but an anti-consolatory idiosyncrasy that resists the obliteration of the dead. The poet is reluctant to let go of his father, simply write him into his poetry, and then transfigure his dead father into a heavenly being. The appearance of the father figure again and again testifies Father’s influences on Lee’s poetic language and “the ripe

weight” of their father-son relationship.

Creative Cultural Translation of Diasporic Hybridity

The multilevel interweaving mentioned above is considered by Steven Yao to be the “grafting” of disjunct cultures:

As an image for the process by which he attaches the exotic bough of Asian ethnic experience to the American branch of the poetic tradition in English, “grafting” offers a more exact term than hybridity for understanding Lee’s accomplishment in “Persimmons.” For, as I hope to have shown, despite referring to Chinese cultural practices and despite the early success in achieving a significantly cross-cultural poetic in the opening lines, Lee’s poem articulates and operates most fundamentally in an English symbolic and linguistic matrix. Rather than attaining to complete “hybridization,” or the thoroughly interanimating integration of the cultural traditions out of which he draws means of both expression and personal identification, Lee, somewhat more modestly, simply adjoins or appends Chinese elements to what remains an English poetic base. The notion of “grafting,” then, allows for distinctions between different *types* or *degrees* of interaction between contrasting traditions in literary and other texts. By explicitly allowing for the potential distinctness of the sources for ethnic cultural production, the term enables finer delineations to be made between different strategies employed *within* individual texts. It thereby constitutes a refinement or extension of the broad concept of “hybridity” as a model for Asian American cultural production, which tends to elide just such differences. Additional refinements in the form of a complete typology of cross-cultural expressive and representational strategies await further research into work by other Asian American

writers, including those who employ and make reference to cultural traditions and languages other than Chinese. Accordingly, then, reading Li-young Lee's "Persimmons" involves more than just evaluating one writer's representative attempt to articulate the dimensions of his ethnicity. (20)

The concept of "grafting" is suggestive, being drawn from horticultural practice to indicate the condition of the transported or even transplanted persimmons from Chinese soil to American land. However, I want to argue that even though the persimmon has been "grafted" or transplanted, "some things would never leave a persimmon": its Chinese heart of sun, essential flavour and texture, and linguistic and cultural implications associated with the speaker's experience as a schoolboy. In addition, in respect of the persimmons drawn by the speaker's father on the cloth, every stroke of the paintbrush merges with different colours and the inter-veined pattern of the cloth so that it conveys the idea of hybridization. It is acceptable to see "grafting" as an extended branch but still "hybridity" is the broader main trunk and involves the linguistic mourning over the lost grip of the speaker's mother tongue due to migration. Ramazani's review offers the best annotation to the poem because he thinks that "Persimmons"

conjoins American confessionalism (painful personal memories of

being slapped by a teacher) with a Chinese father's ars poetica of calligraphic precision, memory, and texture—a painterly emphasis that the poem transmutes into the son's feel for the sensuous texture of persimmons and of words [...] Even as it recalls *violent intercultural collision*, the poem explores, in its hybridizing mediation of Chinese and American stylistic elements, the possibilities of reconciliation at the aesthetic level that were unavailable in the schoolboy's lived experience. As Lee's poem indicates, transnational and intercultural poetry imaginatively reconfigures the relations among the ingredients drawn from disparate cultural worlds and fused within its verbal and formal space. (Ramazani 2009: 18; italics mine)

No matter it is grafting or hybridity that is used to describe the condition of a migrant person/persimmon, what is inevitable to the grafted or hybridized immigrants is the “violent intercultural collision,” the linguistic impact in particular. For Marilyn Chin, the poet emigrating from Hong Kong, her poem “The Colonial Language Is English” explains how that intercultural collision works on her consciousness:

Heaven manifests its duality
 My consciousness on earth is twofold
 My parents speak with two tongues
 My mother's tongue is Toisan²³
 My father's tongue is Cantonese
 The colonial language is English
 I and thou, she and thee

²³ Toisan, or Taishan, is a costal county-level city in Guangdong (Canton) Province, China, and is noted for being a major hometown to a vast population of overseas Chinese who emigrated to Americas since the mid-nineteenth century. Toisan, or Taishanese, also refers to the lingua franca spoken by those immigrant Chinese.

My mother is of two minds
 The village and the family
 My mother loves me, I am certain
 She moulded my happiness in her womb
 My mother loves my brother, certainly
 His death was not an enigma
 Yet, it, too, had its mystery (Chin 2002a: 20)

The speaker lays bare her linguistically dual nature in this poem. In this stanza words such as “duality,” “twofold,” “two tongues,” and “two minds” are obvious enough to make out that the speaker tries to construct a dichotomous state that best describes her mindset, in which the binary cultural collision is happening. However, if we carefully examine the lines, we find out that the speaker uses threefold languages to make sense of her parents and the world around her, that is Toisan, Cantonese, and English. In reality, as Chin recounts in her own words, she can understand more than three languages: “In Hong Kong, I speak a broken Cantonese, Toisan, English argot. I get by. In Beijing, I will speak a very bad Mandarin. It is strange to live in these ‘mother’ countries and be confined to a limited verbal vocabulary. I often feel infantilized—especially when my eighty-year-old grandmother had to bargain at the street market for me and then, afterward, buy me sweet bean cakes at the night market. It is both humbling and wonderful. And it is also important to have a chance to defend my Americaness once in a while. I can

only know my privilege when I am juxtaposed against those with less” (Chin 2010: 139). There are at least four different languages that shape Chin’s ways of thinking and looking at her status of in-betweenness, but she needs her “broken” and “limited” mother tongues to “defend [her] Americanness.”

The tension of dualities, or even of wrestling with four languages, in various aspects hence propels the speaker to swear in “the colonial language” in the title poem of *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*:

Say: A scentless camellia bush bloodied the afternoon.
 Fuck this line, can you really believe this?
 When did I become the master of suburban bliss?
 With whose tongue were we born?
 The language of the masters is the language of the aggressors.
 We’ve studied their cadence carefully—
 enrolled in a class to *improve our accent*.
 Meanwhile, they hover over, waiting for us to stumble . . .
 to drop an article, mispronounce an R.
 Say: softly, softly, the silent gunboats glide.
 O onerous sibilants, O onomatopoetic glibness.
 Say:
 How could we write poetry in a time like this?
 A discipline that makes much ado about so little?
 Willfully laconic, deceptively disguised as a love poem.
 (Chin 2002: 101-02; italics original)

The scope of the issue here is not merely the speaker’s personal experiences but also a political issue involving mastery of “the language of the masters”

and the cultural indoctrination that came with it. The speaker speaks here as a poet who inveighs against her own line in the poem written in English and calls in question when and why she became “the master of suburban bliss,” someone who masters “the language of the masters” and enjoys “suburban bliss,” contrary to and far away from the “authoritative centre.” It is this linguistic ambivalence that sustains her melancholic rage and irresolution and deflects her hostility toward the language she was subjected to. As a descendant of Chinese immigrants, the speaker casts doubts on the tongue she is born into because the way she speaks has affected how American people judge her: she needs to “study their cadence carefully” and “improve [her] accent.” Unfortunately, she stumbles over some words when speaking, “drops an article,” and hardly ever distinguishes an R from an L sound. The female speaker’s mispronunciation in Chin’s “Rhapsody” resonates just right with that of the sixth-grade schoolboy in Lee’s “Persimmons.” Both poets incidentally point out the case that often occurs in immigrants’ pronunciation of the R and L sound. In addition, non-native speakers of “the colonial language” often have difficulty pronouncing “onerous sibilants.” Worse still, their mispronunciations are belittled as “onomatopoetic glibness,” which makes fun of their glib tongue is simply mimicry, i.e., mechanical repetition of

“the language of the masters” as well as “the language of the aggressors.”

This stanza also prompts a drastic questioning about the role of poetry itself. In a time like the late nineteenth century or the first half of the twentieth century, an Asian immigrant like the speaker was not supposed to write poetry and “make much ado” about their own rights, which were depreciated “little”—minute and insignificant thing. To voice their ideas the early poets could only make their work “deceptively disguised a love poem.” “To elegize,” as Ramazani suggests, “is to enjoy one’s grief, to indulge the onanistic work of mourning” (1994: 7). While the former part of the stanza serves as an epitome of a modern mourning for the indeterminacy of her accent as well as pronunciation, the later part shifts its focus and tells the reader to enjoy this elegy and look upon it as a love poem. In other words, the prejudiced view of the masters/aggressors does not deter the speaker from expressing herself because for her those false impressions are her disguises, or deceptions, which she takes as a subversion to undermine the mainstream white culture. While undermining the mainstream society of America, she also interrogates the validity of American multiculturalism by asking the two ironic, rhetorical, interrogative questions in reply: “How could we write poetry in a time like this?” and “A discipline that makes much ado about so little?”

Actually I would argue that these two questions are face-to-face questions first asked by “the same,” symbolised by the white “masters” and “aggressors,” and then hurled back in reply by the Other, i.e. the poetic speaker, symbolising the racialised subjects and immigrants. According to Levinas, “The immediate is the face to face” (1969: 52). Furthermore, he adds, “The immediate is the interpellation and, if we may speak thus, the imperative of language” (ibid.). In other words, we can equate face to face with interpellation as well as the imperative of language. As a consequence, what the female poetic speaker, as an Other, says is a linguistic imperative and countermeasure to stop the horizon of “the same” from expanding.

The Other is also attempting to defend Asian American poets who write Asian American poetry in the face of canonical Euro-American poets. What the Other means to express is to build up a discipline (Asian American poetry) “that makes much ado about so little.” In this regard, the Other is posing an immediate interpellation and the imperative of language that would protect and undergird poetic subjectivity of Asian American poets. My argument is aligned with that of Dorothy J. Wang when she highlights the role of “racial interpellation” and “racialized subjectivity” (xxiii). What’s more, Wang even declares: “What is true for white poets is true for minority poets. And vice

versa" (ibid.). Wang's comment is to lay bare the lack of sustained critical attention to Asian American poetry and its language and to "understand the nuanced and complex interplay between 'form' and 'content'" (ibid.). Let's take a look at the caustic question that the speaker raises at the end of "Rhapsody in Plain Yellow," which bluntly exposes the most crucial spot of the field of English-language poetics and directly jabs at that spot in "the language of the masters": "Would you have loved me more if I were black?" (102). The speaker trenchantly points out that Asians occupy lower and more marginalised space even than black people's in both the American national body and the American literary imaginary. The white speaker then asks in retort: "Would I have loved you more if you were white?" (ibid.), which corroborates the testimony and evidence I mentioned above. In sum, Chin in this poem situates both Asian American language and poetry in aesthetic and social realms in which ethnicity is an inevitable factor with profound effects. By bringing up questions, the poet links the same with the Other via language, making the two parties maintain an ethical relationship. As Levinas affirms,

We shall try to show that the *relation* between the same and the other—upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions—is language. For language accomplishes a relation such that [...] the other, despite the relationship with the same, remains

transcendent to the same. The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation” (1969: 39; *italics original*).

For Levinas, the ethical relationship is never the one between more powerful and less powerful but one that is based on “conversation.” As a result, language plays an important part not only in the conversation between white Americans and Asian Americans, Mrs Walker and the immigrant schoolboy, “the aggressors” and the female speaker, as we’ve seen in Lee and Chin’s poems, but also in the making of metaphors (persimmons and the rhapsody) that underscore the “racialized subjectivity” of Asian American poets who most often were overlooked by common readers as well as English-language literary academy.

The “wilful” making a discipline a “love poem” can be seen as Chin’s wilful looking for identity in the context of diasporic hybridity and cultural translation. As a matter of fact, the speaker in many poems of both poets hints at the poets themselves. Their writing of self history, according to Janet Gunn, is “the cultural act of a self reading” (8). Ien Ang, in her discussion of autobiographical discourse, further defines it as “a reflexive positioning of oneself in history and culture” (24). She also considers autobiographic writing “a more or less deliberate, rhetorical construction of a

‘self’ for public, not private purposes: the displayed self is a strategically fabricated performance, one which stages a useful identity, an identity which can be put to work” (24). Both poets creatively stage that useful cultural identity, trying to sketch the contours of the in-betweenness as a diasporic subject. As a concept of aesthetics, the discourse of diaspora not only foregrounds the multicultural hybridity of an identity but also pays attention to the incompatibility of cultures: something like the attributes that cannot be gotten rid of, and ideas or habits that cannot be given up but makes no sense. The idea of diaspora provides us with a possibility to imagine in the context of impossibility, as well as a way of surviving in the condition of incompatibility. In the process of hybridization, gain and loss are ineluctable, which are not “wilful” personal choice most of the time. On the contrary, gain and loss during hybridization and translation are involved in the operation of power relationships, dialectics of ideologies, battles of discourses, which all require an interdisciplinary and transnational field of vision that sees through cultural productions and reproductions. As Salman Rushdie sensibly and perspectively declares, “It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained” (1991: 17). The gain and loss thus form a dynamic, which I would

term “creative mourning” in the third space between cultures. Mourning over loss is unidirectional, but creative mourning involves two-way process of gaining and losing, intersecting and transgressing borders. As Ang asserts, “a critical diasporic cultural politics should privilege neither host country nor (real or imaginary) homeland, but precisely keep a creative tension between ‘where you’re from’ and ‘where you’re at’” (35). Since diasporas are fundamentally and spatiotemporally transnational in linking the homeland and the foreign land, the past and the present, they enjoy privilege unsettling the static conventions and undermining all essentialized and totalitarian notions of national identity. The act of unsettling, undermining, and going beyond borders will turn hybridity into creativity and productivity in the process of cultural translation.

The in-between transnational consciousness is ironically played when the speaker in “The Colonial Language Is English” says her happiness was “moulded in [her mother’s] womb” (Chin 2002a: 20). It is, however, not happiness but “outsider sensibility” was moulded in Chin when she was in her mother’s womb, in accordance with Chin’s account:

“Mother China” will always reject me; she no longer recognizes me as one of her own. “Father America” continues to erect his perennial

walls and exclusion acts. My own father was a bigamist and left us for a white woman (a metaphor for assimilation and ultimate rejection of his past). I was born in colonial Hong Kong, which meant that my passport was meaningless. I was neither Chinese nor British. I was raised by my grandmother who spoke a subdialect of Cantonese, and in Hong Kong we were seen as interlopers from the country. We were poor peasants, and the fact that we survived through the turbulent history of modern China was because of a few strong-willed matriarchs who kept us running. We were shunned everywhere we went—perhaps all this explains my “outsider” sensibility. (Chin 2010: 140)

Her identification with “mother China” and “father America” explains the last two lines of this poem: “My mother is me, my father is thee / As we drown in the seepage of Sutter Mill”²⁴ (Chin 2002a: 21). The speaker is haunted by the hybridized identity because of her vacillating state between mother and father countries and because of the several languages that are inherited and spoken by her and her parents. Being Chinese immigrants in America, they have sense of homelessness and helplessness so they feel “drown in the seepage” of gold sands in the course of historical torrent of Chinese Americans. Their mother tongues seem to be silenced in the history just like those Chinese migrant labourers in the mid-nineteenth century whose voice

²⁴ Sutter’s mill, located in California, was owned by nineteenth-century pioneers John Sutter and James W. Marshall. It is most famous for being the first site where the gold was discovered in 1848. Ever since the “gold rush” began, which brought hundreds of thousands of Chinese people to work, California has been completely transformed by the historical event in modern history.

The speaker compares her mental and cultural duality to a peach, whose “fair side” is “the Chinese half” that is worn and “darkened by the knife of time.” She in the opening lines conveys her anxiety of losing her “fair side of a peach.” In other words, no matter how “fair” a peach is, it would become oxidized in the wake of exposure to the “foreign” air. Chin’s representation of an immigrant’s twofold mindset dominated by both Chinese and American cultures is embodied in the metaphorical peach, which happens to resemble Lee’s adroit manipulation of the metaphors such as persimmon, peach, or pear. The image of “the knife of time” cutting the peach here is like Mrs Walker’s cutting up of the persimmon, leading to the binary splitting of an immigrant schoolboy or girl’s perception of the society that he or she is living in. The speaker’s likening of her Chinese half to “the fair side of a peach” suggests that she is defending her Chineseness, which is also resembling the sweet and crisp heart of the “Chinese apple,” “something golden, glowing, / warm as [her] face,” and its falling away in the process of assimilating into the American culture could be as cruel as the sun, since “gone” and “sun” are rhymed. As Ang proposes, “Chineseness is a category whose meanings are not fixed and pregiven, but constantly renegotiated and rearticulated, both inside and outside China” (25). In other words, no matter how “fair” a peach

is, there must be a chemical action “both inside and outside” of the peach when it is exposed to the American air with the passage of “the knife of time.”

The factor of time has been playing the most crucial part in losing the speaker's Chinese/fair half. For fear of losing her Chinese part of herself the speaker attempted to write a letter to her mother in Chinese but unfortunately something is missing:

In my thirtieth year
I wrote a letter to my mother.
I had forgotten the character
for “love.” I remember vaguely
the radical “heart.”
The ancestors won’t fail to remind you
the vital and vestigial organs
where the emotions come from.
But the rest is fading.
A slash dissects in midair,
ai, ai, ai, ai,
more of a cry than a sigh
(and no help from the phoneticist). (ibid.)

The speaker has forgotten how to write the Chinese character for “love,” made of a “heart” inside, a character within the character. Since the Chinese character for “love” is a derivative of pictograph, the “heart” in “love” symbolizes the basic element in delivering instinctive human emotions. This

“heart,” in particular, functions metaphorically, exuding polyvalent significances. As Chin reminds her non-Chinese readers in the “Notes” appended to the poems, the character for “love” comprises the character for “heart,” serving as the “semantic radical” for “love.” In this regard, the poet puns on both meanings of the linguistic term, drawing on the sense of the root of a word, as well as the political term, resorting to the sense of a far-reaching political belief in resisting, when the speaker wants to scribe “the radical heart.” The radical heart, being the fundamental part of the Chinese character “love,” reveals the speaker’s nature of loving her mother, Chinese culture, and the radical consciousness of defending her Chinese half due to that love. The radical consciousness could be a form of both resistant mourning that refuses to replace her Chinese ego with an acculturated one and profound mourning that is made to recall her mother and mother culture. In other words, with the effect of “the knife of time,” the “vital organ”—the heart—remains radical, although vestigial, and that semantic radical for love metaphorizes the poet’s aggression in the face of losing her cultural heritage. Also, “the knife of time” compels the speaker to let out a cry, *ai*, a scream or roar pronounced the same as “love” in Mandarin Chinese but meaning an exclamation of radical pain. The speaker loves (*ai*) her Chinese cultural half

but feels halved, uttering an exclamation (*ai*) to declare her unhomeliness in cultures and languages. Thus, these lines illustrate Chin's excellent play on visual and audio effects that a single Chinese character can achieve in arousing reader's understanding and empathy.

In addition to the onomatopoetic word for irritation and the reference to the Mandarin Chinese character for love, “metaphorically and linguistically, the diphthong articulates a multiplicity of tones in a space not fully excavated for their expression,” as Irene C. Hsiao puts it (190). Indeed, the diphthong is even more resonant than I have suggested. As stated by Hsiao, “‘That Half Is Almost Gone’ [...] explores the question of identity formally in the homonym, recasting the problem of *I* as specific to writing and necessary to metaphor” (193; *italic original*). The quadruple diphthong *ai* here reasserts the subjectivity of the speaker's “I” in terms of diasporic condition. By means of letting out the cry, the speaker endeavours to affirm who she is, albeit unfortunately in a foreign language. Hsiao further points out that “The poem emphatically absents the character (love), mechanically and ideologically distancing the speaker from her native language” (194). What Hsiao says confirms my argument that the English language that the speaker uses to consolidate her identity actually deepens her sense of loss, which has become

a state of being, a way of communicating, and the sound of suffering. And since the speaker mourns for the forgetting of the character for love, whose radical “heart” barely exists in her memory, she could only utter a sigh (*ai*) and rely on her eye (*ai*) to recollect that earlier familial cultural heritage. Interestingly enough, when talking about a writer’s choice of language, Ha Jin refers to those who compose in the language of their adopted country and indicates that their strategy of writing is one that “alienates [them] from [their] mother tongue and directs [their] creative energy towards another language” (31). I would argue that in Chin’s case she directs her creative energy towards conjugating her mother tongue with the language of her adopted country to express her radical concern to recollect her cultural heritage as well as reconfigure her cultural identity.

Without a doubt, Marilyn Chin’s poetic shriek of four consecutive *ai* echoes Frank Chin and his fellow writers’ historic howl—*Aiiieeeee*—across thirty years. Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong were the editors of *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974). Their effort to look beyond Euro-American-centred literary convention and to locate Asian American literature within American literary history had a great influence on writers of later generations and made an

undeniable contribution to the growth of subsequent literary study in the field. As they proclaimed eloquently in the “Preface” to *Aiiieeeee!*,

Asian-America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is our AIIIEEEEE!!! It’s more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice. (Chin et al. vii)

These pioneering editors marked the independence and coming-of-age of Asian American literature in their introduction with a clarion call. Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald, in a critical essay about Frank Chin, even associates the preface and introduction to *Aiiieeeee!* with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s landmark essay “The American Scholar” of 1837, arguing that: “*Aiiieeeee!* is a declaration of intellectual and linguistic independence, and an assertion of Asian American manhood” (McDonald xix). Ever since the publication of this ground-breaking anthology, Asian Americans have built up a unique space in American literature and culture.²⁵ As a consequence, Marilyn Chin not only continues the spirit of protest initiated by Frank Chin but also

²⁵ The historical significance of *Aiiieeeee!* along with its “Preface” and “Introduction” as a declaration of Asian American have generally been affirmed by writers and academics. Later anthologists of Asian American literature all highly approve of the magnitude of *Aiiieeeee!*. Some endorse it as a “landmark” (Berson xii; Hagedorn xxvi), while others depict it as “groundbreaking” (Uno 7) or “path-breaking” (Wang and Zhao xvi).

intentionally and aggressively breaks new ground by awakening readers to a sense of Asian American sensibility with the metaphorical multiplicity and linguistic polysemy of the famous consecutive *ai* three decades later.

Likewise, Shawn Wong has also described the *Aiiieeeee!* they edited as “turning a dying cry into a shout of resistance and triumph” (91) thirty years from the year of its publication. The battle cries of the early and later generations of Asian American poets thus not only symbolise their mourning for loss and shouting for resistance but also summons the hybrid muse to demonstrate their love (*ai*) for both cultural heritages.

By means of interweaving the Chinese character with the English stitch, Chin is making the poem a hybridized form of verse steeped in metaphors. As Ramazani comments on the poet A. K. Ramanujan, “metaphor and translation function for him as closely related forms of mediation between languages, between cultures, perhaps even between halves of the brain” (Ramazani 2001: 77). Here Chin appropriates the “radical heart,” the metaphor as similar to what Ramazani instances as the brain, for the purpose of being a conceptual site of intercultural exchange. In this site various forms of mediation and translation between languages, cultures, and histories have been taking place and for this reason the speaker’s heart is “radical.”

Yet with the heart Westernized through time, this “vital” organ has transformed into a “vestigial” one. These two alliterated words are ingenuously joined up to reveal how the spatiotemporal and intercultural differences have worked out on this metaphorical subject.

In addition to her angst about losing the ability to write in Chinese, the speaker feels the anxiety of speechlessness as well. As each half of the organ about Chinese is “fading,” her mouth, brain, and heart are turning “vestigial.” Getting aphasia in Chinese is the last thing that the speaker would expect to happen. She labours to read out loud *ai*, the pronunciation for love in Mandarin Chinese, in quadruple to assure herself that the translation and transaction between Chinese and English are proceeding without help, fortunately, from the “phoneticist.” The internal rhyme among *ai*, “cry,” and “sigh” bring to attention the vowel sound which enunciates and relieves the speaker’s anguish. In virtue of the enunciation of the Chinese character the speaker remembers, reclaims, and recuperates her mother tongue. The “vital and vestigial organs,” including the mouth, brain, and heart, thus embody the confluence of hybridity of languages, cultures, and metaphors, generating “creative mourning” and forming a dynamic to articulate languages in a creative way.

The “creative mourning” is also represented when the speaker expresses her Chinese way of thinking in English while there are grammatical errors, which conduces to the hybridity of languages. For example, in this line: “The ancestors won’t fail to remind you / the vital and vestigial organs” it is perceived that there is a presumably deliberate missing of the preposition “of” framed by the poet to show that it is a common verbal mistake made by Chinese who forgets the verb “remind” and its indirect object should be followed by a preposition—“of.” Moreover, the rare usage of “phoneticist” rather than “phonetician” suggests the poet’s intentional arrangement that the speaker does not have a full command of English the language. What’s more, there is misconception about the designed visual word play installed by the poet. Chin misapprehends that “a slash goes straight across the ‘heart’” in her “Notes” (Chin 2002: 105) but in fact there is no any slash needed when writing the “heart” within the Chinese character for “love.” So this misuse might have resulted in the poet’s false association with a slash dissecting the heart and the painful exclamation “*ai*.” “A slash goes straight across the ‘heart,’” however, does form another word, meaning “necessary.” In this regard, Chin in this line “A slash dissects in midair” could signify that the outcomes of “That half is almost gone” is necessary: “forgetting the character,”

“remember vaguely the radical ‘heart,’” “vestigial organs,” “the rest is fading.”

Besides, to love with heart is necessary; otherwise, to love with heart slashed

is not *ai* (love) but *ai* (ouch). The sonic word play, punning Mandarin

Chinese pronunciation of the character “love” with an excruciating shout,

fortunately, happens to describe the inner struggle of an immigrant. In light

of the clues divulged in these lines concerning the “radical heart,” the

“unhomeliness” in both languages is apparently observed in both the poet and

the speaker.

The sense of gain and loss of “the fair side of a peach,” “the radical heart,”

“the vital and vestigial organs,” and the emotions and love for mother/alien

culture grows in abundance all because of the effect of cultural translation,

which concerns the adjustment, deterritorialization, reterritorialization of

ideologies and gives rise to the rebuilding of affective and perceptive

structures as well as the ethnic consciousness. “Homeland” is not taken for

granted anymore as a geographical concept or a social organization as a result

of going in diaspora. “Love” is not an easily obtained gift either. Personal

stories of growth do not necessarily follow the trajectory of launching a rocket

upward into the sky. People’s interactions under the circumstances of

frequent border crossing would also bring about a wide variety of complicated

plots. Within the context of diaspora, strong emotions such as love and hatred, guilt and antagonism, despondence and defiance, vexation and rebellion are found to be practised in the real life of the diasporic subject in a creative and violent way. The diasporic subject keeps crossing borders of conventional national and cultural space and thus loosens up literary and cultural imaginations as well as the sense of space and geography. Chin invites the reader to rethink about the relationships between homeland and the foreign land, mother tongue and the foreign language, which may seem opposite but intimate, with the help of the Chinese character for love. If anyone could examine and weigh everything up with love, then even mourning over loss could turn into creativity.

The use of Chinese characters as a metaphor to translate a Chinese immigrant's complicated feeling in the face of assimilation and his/her love for the father or mother is not uniquely seen in Chin's poem but also Lee's. Lee recollects an event about his father by mentioning his father's name:

Once, while I walked
 with my father, a man
 reached out, touched his arm, said, *Kuo Yuan?*
 The way he stared and spoke my father's name,
 I thought he meant to ask, *Are you a dream?*
 Here was the sadness of ten thousand miles,

of an abandoned house in Nan Jing,
 where my father helped a blind man
 wash his wife's newly dead body,
 then bury it, while bombs
 fell, and trees raised
 charred arms and burned.
 Here was a man who remembered
 the sound of another's footfalls
 so well as to call to him
 after twenty years
 on a sidewalk in America. (Lee 1990: 23; italics original)

By telling a story of a blind man who had been helped by Lee's father, Lee
 manifests the truth of his father's merciful spirit of being a doctor and also the
 history of a war-torn country that compels his father to live as an exile all his
 life. "The sadness of ten thousand miles / on a sidewalk in America"
 connects his father with this blind man and the country China, which harmed
 him since the moment his father became an exile. Lee explains the
 relationship between the country, his father, and his father's name:

My father's name had the word *country* in it. And one day I was
 writing the word *country* over and over again, and I realized, Oh, it's
 a spear enclosed in a heart. Suddenly I felt like that really explained
 him. He had a barb inside of him that wounded him and hurt him
 all the time. And that reminded me of my father. So it's like
 pictorial associations, not phonetic associations, though I'm sure
 that's there, too. But the picture-making mind is very important to
 poetic writing and making. Because the picture-making mind is an
 idea. An image is an idea in its most pristine form. [...] The image

itself is the pristine idea. [...] An image is the first idea. An idea is like a denatured image. So those little pictures are ideas. Like a country, or a spear: that's an idea. The picture of 'good' is a woman and a child. You know that's an idea. (Lee 2006: 109-10; italics original)

Lee's analysis of his father's name illustrates not only the history of his father and the father country but also his own idea about how the Chinese language, in which many words develop from images and pictographs, shapes his poetic mind. The anatomic examination of his father's name as well as the wound of his heart, caused by the political and intercultural spears, can be regarded as laying bare the linguistic, historical, and cultural wound, which leaves his mourning for the father and personal and racial memory unresolved and continuing to be creative.

The heart as the metaphorically transactional site between languages, memories, and histories is further displayed in the following lines:

America, where, in Chicago, Little Chinatown,
 who should I see
 on the corner of Argyle and Broadway
 but Li Bai and Du Fu, those two
 poets of the wanderer's *heart*. (Lee 1990: 23; italic mine)

Lee invests all the historical, geographical, cultural, and linguistic

discrepancies with condensed meanings in “the wanderer’s heart,” which elucidates his own poetic nourishment and origin and many other Chinese immigrants’ ambivalent mind wandering between America and China.

The diaspora may refer to an individual or an ethnic community having to be in exile out of the homeland voluntarily or involuntarily. They cross the national, geo-political, and cultural borders and create an imagined community and a new identity in the third space. Stuart Hall has theorized identity as “a form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak” (236-7). Reading Chin and Lee as diasporic poets enables us to find out their creative mourning as well as metaphoric hybridity in their poetry, which contains polyvalent significance in the process of cultural translation. They make use of collective memory and their linguistic memory and density to create a new map of cultural identity. Khachig Tölölyan, once proclaims in the preface of the inaugural issue of the Journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, “To affirm that diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment is not to write the premature obituary of the nation-state, which remains a privileged form of polity” (5). Poets like Chin and Lee are absolutely not obituary writers. They compose

elegy that makes the reader meditate on linguistic gain and loss for Asian

Americans encountering cultural translation.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to look for the solutions to the core research questions at the initial stage of my research. To begin with, Asian Americans have suffered from lots of experiences of loss owing to the historical forces, or what I term historical ghostliness, and unethical treatments from the mainstream American society. Their sense of loss derived from the inevitable pull of assimilation that compels them to choose between assimilation and resistance. For this reason, Asian American writers tended to mourn for the loss of their homeland, mother tongue, culture, and identity, whereas Euro-American writers used to mourn over the death of their beloved in laudatory terms in their tradition and anticipate in doing so to attain to consolation, substitution, and salvation.

In the next place, Asian American poets can make very different representations of Asian American culture based on their own experiences by taking different strategies and measures. For instance, those who appropriate ancient Chinese texts combined with “a faulty memory” could possibly be accused of “destroying history and literature,” in Frank Chin’s words, because they made “contribution to the stereotype.” However, with

the march of time as well as the advance of literary critical concepts, the postmodern idea of diversity, hybridity, and transnationalism has stepped in and subverted conventional thought about fixed boundary of realms. In other words, there is no more so-called one-and-only way of writing and interpreting the text and intertextuality is considered a good way to make creative literary productions. An Asian American poet like Marilyn Chin can identify herself as an activist feminist poet and set the world on fire by conveying her notion of extreme protest over and over again in her poems, while another type of poet like Li-Young Lee grounds his poems on the plain and everyday imagery and his own heart-rending experiences, exploring themes of family (especially the father figure), love, memory, and metaphysical viewpoint of “universe mind” in an extraordinarily tender manner. Although they present their sense of loss in very different ways and styles, I argue that we can view their poetry about mourning and loss as cultural elegy, a genre and model located within a larger context of Asian American literature. Their cultural elegy is grounded in psychoanalytic and literary tradition, and is born out of a profound experience of cultural conflict and estrangement, much of which turns on some form of protest or mourning. In this regard, both of the poets mourn for the loss of ethnic identity, family,

and language in an unconventional way, involving both gaining and losing, intersecting and transgressing borders and forming a cultural dynamic, which I propose the idea of “creative mourning.”

Following the concept, I would claim it is helpful for modern elegists to deal with the issue of various losses in life because they embrace the sense of contradictions, or, namely, a melancholic ambivalence of detachment from and attachment to libido. Modern elegists incorporate more anger and scepticism, more conflict and irresolution, to represent their concerns, prolong the grief, and even leave the work of mourning undone. Their purpose of doing so is to “preserve a pristine space for grieving for the dead amid the speed and pressure of modern life” (Ramazani 1994: 14) and also to remind people that we should brace ourselves for “losing farther, losing faster.”

These findings may account for why I choose to interpret these two Asian American poets’ work in terms of cultural elegy because, according to Peter Sacks, it “reexamine[s] the connections between language and the pathos of human consciousness” and “is characterized by unusually powerful intertwining of emotion and rhetoric, of loss and figuration.” And by taking these two Asian American poets as an example, this study has taken a step in

the direction of defining Asian American elegy and expanding and extending the scope of my discussion on a larger scale of the whole Asian American community. As a consequence, the findings and implications of this study can be generalised to the extent that any Asian American poem about mourning and loss can be treated as an Asian American cultural elegy. Besides, I even launch a conversation between Chin's and Lee's poems, between their poems and other literary critics, between the poets' mentality and mine. I hope by doing so that this study can raise people's awareness of reading poems as cultural elegy and lead people to cherish what they have and appreciate the beauty of it before losing it. Furthermore, because the ambiance of loss has spread among Asian American community and pervaded throughout the twentieth century since the second half of the nineteenth century, the reconfiguration and reconsideration of reading Asian American poetry as cultural elegy enable us to witness the history, call for new strategic terms, and set up a foothold for future possibilities. The point of this study is to probe into two of the most critically acclaimed and academically anthologised Asian American poets and their works and situate their achievements in the American literary coordinate. The connection between dots and dots (including Asian American, elegy, ethnicity, family, language,

and so on) is thus established. Last but not least, I have also managed to lay out the aesthetic and formal dimensions, such as figurative devices, meters and rhythms, rhyme schemes, when investigating those poems. The philosophical and metaphysical level of the two poets' works is also examined by referring to Levinas's ethics of the Other, which is quite useful when speaking of the otherness of "racialized subjectivity" and Lee's unique sense of linguistic alienation.

Although the present study has yielded findings that have both interpretative and critical significance, its design is not without flaws. Firstly, more Asian American contemporary poets and their oeuvre can be brought into the discussion. What is more, a variety of themes, besides ethnicity, family, and language, are also worth mentioning when talking about mourning over loss. When one theme is mentioned, certain themes cannot be properly missed as they are oftentimes interrelated. Thirdly, more critiques, especially those directly pointing to Chin and Lee, should be incorporated into the study to make it more comprehensive and convincing. Future studies should thus be alerted to the limitations of this study.

While this study has its limitations, it is hoped that it can serve as a basis for further study with regard to Asian American cultural elegy. Although the

sample in this study was small, this thesis could serve as a first step for researchers who would like to explore similar contexts. Additional research would be of great interest and value in understanding the role of cultural elegy and its influence on Asian American poetry. To pursue more interpretative possibilities embedded in Asian American poetry, future researchers should investigate more parameters of poetry, like themes, forms, narratives, audiences, or philosophies, which give them more profound and interdisciplinary perspectives on the study of Asian American poetry. This thesis is by no means exhaustive, nor is it likely to be. It may be beneficial, though, if it can contribute to introducing more researchers alike to Asian American poetry as cultural elegy.

Epilogue

Normally people would not touch death with a ten-foot pole but avoid death and the bereaved like the plague. The modern elegist, however, works hard to get people to reconsider this “grave” issue in everybody’s life and get people to be immersed in the balm of their poetic works about grief and loss, rather than repress and silence this essential need for exploring the significance of life and death, gain and loss. In other words, what the modern elegist attempts to achieve is the protracted steadfast bereavement in the poetic world, which serves well as a protest against the social world, preoccupied with the modern hurry-scurry that impedes modern people from contemplating upon the close interrelation between the perfunctory practices of social mourning and the aesthetic critique of poetic mourning. Modern elegists such as Chin and Lee reinvigorate the elegy in order to react against the effacement of the dead and the lost that is easily forgotten and gone with the fast-paced modern life, which aggravates due to the globalised capitalistic economy.

To my surprise, it seems what Yeats describes in the early twentieth century is exactly the same as the life of most salaried workers in the late

twentieth century and the early twenty-first century because both the middle-class and labourers have to work very hard to “add the halfpence to the pence”

(108). The poet even groans with deep feeling of remorse: “We have given the world our passion, [but] we have naught for death but toys” (Yeats 158).

We all agree that the wealth gap has grown wider and wider and even got out of control in the past decades. The wealth is rapidly being concentrated in the hands of the wealthiest one percent of world’s population at the peak of the asset pyramid and the rich have owned more than fifty percent of the world’s wealth. This critical gap between wealthy people and common people is effectuated not by hard work or effort to make money but by the bold use of financial leveraging to make money multiply many times. Many enterprises also strive to cut costs rather than create value, which has made it nearly impossible for salary levels to rise. Commodity prices and real estate rates also soar to a high level that never seems to cease rising and that salaried employees have no way to afford them. Under these rigorous circumstances, a civilian definitely would spend much less time meditating on the aesthetic value of poetic death and loss. What’s worse, the frenetic life of ordinary people, whose only aim is to make money for the sake of barely surviving in the capitalist jungle, would inevitably lead to people’s developing amnesia

about what and whom they used to love, or hate. The modern elegy thereupon provides a perfect space for the psychological necessities of mourning as well as the indulgence in the melancholic bereavement and ambivalence.

To leave is to exile. Ever since everyone left his/her mother's womb, he/she has started a life in exile and can only yearn for the most primal, spiritual, and physical home by feeling constant and unbreakable attachment to it as well as by imagining the perfection of such a Garden of Eden. In other words, we can only build up our own utopia in such a mood of nostalgia. Life, therefore, is a metaphor for exile. We are always on the vacillation between two worlds—the physical and the imaginary one, and we are also always compelled to make choices between two or among more. Choosing means to miss something. Only with regret is life complete. “The road not taken” is as important as the road trodden. The road not taken is suffusing our imaginations. So when we lose our life in this world, we probably enter another life in different forms. The fact that we cannot see it doesn't mean it does not exist. We all learn to tackle loss.

Although the idea of Asian American modern elegy is somewhat semantically obscure at the first sight, I have borrowed Harmon and Holman's

definition of “elegy,” which includes “generalized observations or meditations on solemn theme,” “the expression of a solemn mood,” and “the reflective element or presentation of information” and used them to explore the elements of both poets’ works. With the help of Ramazani’s theorization of poetic mourning and my own coinage of creative mourning, I have attempted to examine and interpret Chin and Lee’s poems and delve into them to search for the significance of loss. The loss of ethnic identity, father and father land, mother and mother tongue have occupied the two poets’ books of poems. Doing this research has had a great influence on me and I believe both poets have had already perceived how the sense and fact of loss has affected them to a great extent. Therefore, the reason why I employ the idea of Asian American elegy is because it has discursive power to reiterate the Asian American cultural history, reflect the experiences of Asian American diasporic writers, and manifest the imagination about Asian America within the context of diaspora and deterritorialization. As a field of being analysed, the idea of Asian America is merely a starting point, serving as an example of being Otherized by Euro-American supremacy and racialism. Anyone who has studied anthropogeography could easily detect that Asia is with a vast expanse and immense cultural diversity, which suggest the confines of the critical

word—Asia. Nevertheless, “Asian American” is the greatest common divisor when discussing the ethnic identity of those Asian immigrants in America. Asian American writers are able to foreground the uncertainty and hybridity of their ethnic identity and capture the moments of conflict between Asian American ethnic communities and white America when pondering over their own relationships with America. It is because the idea of postcolonial Asia is the cultural heritage of Euro-American imperialism that we need to deliberate metaphysically upon various forms of “colonisation” and how cultural translation and exchange proceed between cultures. As a result, the idea of diaspora and elegy turn out to be the key concepts to deal with the heterogeneity of Asian American communities. They are the actual display of cultural translation in a strategic way.

Since the 1980s, a large number of Asian American writers have sprung up. They are what Salman Rushdie calls those “who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties.” Therefore, they have been keeping exploring cultural history and geographical imagination of Asian America because in that hybrid third space everything is in fluctuation so that gain and loss are always coming up. The importance and uniqueness of Asian America as a site of cultural

translation is evident and reading Asian American cultural production on the strength of diasporic and elegiac viewpoints is a good way to rebel against any generic norms, sabotage traditional consolatory machinery, inflect the hostility both inward and outward, immerse in the sense of gain and loss, resist the standard elegiac salves, and prolong the melancholic guilt and ambivalence, all of which could trigger plentiful imaginations about Asian American culture.

Cultural translation can never be overemphasised because it helps ideological hegemony communicate and negotiate with the minority. Moreover, it mediates between cultures, appropriates and transplants cultures to construct, reconstruct, and deconstruct the centres and peripheries of structures of dual domination. For this reason, bilingualism or polyglot is a strategic stance that a Taiwanese researcher like myself can take to pay attention to the issue of the minority. A Taiwanese researcher might have three issues to take care of when he/she does research on Asian/Chinese American literature. First, geographically, Taiwan is on the other side of the Pacific Ocean in relation to America. Next, linguistically, the mainstream Asian/Chinese American writers write in English. Third, culturally, those Asian/Chinese American writers seek to shine in the American literary circle

because ultimately many of them consider themselves Americans. A Taiwanese scholar tends to feel sense of familiarity toward Chinese American literary works because they provide him/her with a distinctive position to make a statement in terms of the writer's ethnicity, cultural background, and sensibility. Self-confidence and self-righteous authority could come with that distinctive position because their works oftentimes involve Chinese cultural history and linguistic heritage. Western scholars usually have to rely on English translation, so their misunderstanding about the Chinese or Oriental culture is sometimes inevitable. Drawing upon what I am capable of based on my linguistic advantage (bilingualism) to make up for my disadvantage is something I can do to make a contribution despite the three barriers. I hope my discussion about the two poets can offer anyone who is interested in Asian/Chinese poetry with an extraordinary frame of reference. I also have to remind myself of the risk of essentialism when it comes to the language and its culture that I have been immersed in for more than forty years. One prospect that we can envisage is the expansion of the field of American literature. As a matter of fact, the U.S. government has never stipulated that English is the official national language although most of Asian and Chinese American authors write and publish in English. If we could

survey the American literature with a more flexible multilingualism, then literary creations in Chinese could possibly one day play a critical role in the canon of American literature.

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