ASIAN AMERICAN POETRY: DIASPORA AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

This essay reads Asian American poems of diaspora not simply as articulations of exile and displacement, but more importantly as a discourse that disturbs essentializing narratives of the nation-state, and disrupts the unified space-time of national history. As such, Asian American poems of diaspora are a form of resistance to assimilation, offering an alternative mode of identity construction to that of nationalist ideology which evokes an indigenous bond to the national territory and history in its formulation of a naturalized national identity that excludes difference, and forces the other to conform, to be absorbed into the hierarchical social structure without disturbance or perturbation. I use the term "diaspora" to refer to a particular set of existential conditions, a theoretical position, and a poetics that challenges racial hierarchy, and undermines assimilationist ideologies of the United States, through poetic and linguistic innovations.

Keywords: Asian-American, Poetry, Diaspora, Identity, Language, Nation-State, Assimilation, Resistance.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza poemas de la diáspora asiático-americana no sólo como expresiones de exilio y desarraigo, sino lo que es más importante como un discurso que perturba narrativas esencialistas sobre el estado-nación y trastorna el espacio-tiempo unificado de la historia nacional. Como tal, los poemas asiático-americanos de la diáspora son una forma de resistencia a la asimilación, ofreciendo una forma de construir la identidad alternativa a la de la ideología nacionalista, que evoca una relación indígena con el territorio y la historia nacionales en su formulación de una identidad nacional naturalizada excluyente de cualquier diferencia, y que obliga al "otro" a ajustarse, a ser absorbido en la estructura social jerárquica sin perturbación alguna. Uso el término "diáspora" para referirme a un conjunto específico de condiciones existenciales, a una posición teórica, y a una poética que se enfrenta a la jerarquización racial y subvierte las ideologías asimilacionistas de los Estados Unidos a través de la innovación poética y lingüística.

Palabras clave: Asiático-americano, poesía, diáspora, identidad, lengua, estado-nación, asimilación, resistencia.

In the past two decades, the attention of cultural studies to postmodern globalization has highlighted the implications of the fact that "a troubling outsider turns up *inside* bourgeois domestic space. She cannot be held at a distance," as James Clifford puts it in his introduction to *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Clifford notes, "After 1950 peoples long spoken for by Western ethnographers, administrators, and missionaries began to speak and act more powerfully for themselves on a global stage. It was increasingly difficult to keep them in their (traditional) places" (6). In a similar vein, Stuart Hall in his talk, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," asserts that in the "global post-modern" moment, "the most profound cultural revolution has come about as a consequence of the margins coming into representation [...] Not just to be placed by the regime of some other, or imperializing eye but to reclaim some form of representation for themselves" (32, 34). In other words, a profound transformation of Western culture is being brought about by the change of "othered," the oppressed, and the marginalized from objectified or excluded "Other," to new subjects, who are speaking for themselves in languages of the margin and of diaspora. With this change, homogenized national culture is pluralized and diversified; heterogeneous differences are transforming naturalized national uniformity and cultural purity. However, Hall points out that "when the era of nation-states in globalization begins to decline, one can see a regression to a very defensive and highly dangerous form of national identity which is driven by a very aggressive form of racism" (26). Thus in addition to racially oriented nationalist exclusionism, one of the forms of the global post-modern, Hall adds, "is trying to live with, and at the same moment, overcome, sublate, get hold of, and incorporate difference" (33). A combination of nativist exclusionism and assimilationist policies has been a dominant ideology and practice of the United States. Barred from the U.S. citizenship by law until the second half of the twentieth century, Asian immigrants' and Asian Americans' struggles are reflected in their literature, which is characterized by discursive negotiations with American citizenship and mainstream American culture.[1]

This essay seeks to read Asian American poems of diaspora not simply as articulations of exile and displacement, but more importantly as a discourse that disturbs essentializing narratives of the nation-state, and disrupts the unified space-time of national history. As such, Asian American poems of diaspora are a form of resistance to assimilation, offering an alternative mode of identity construction to that of cultural nationalist claims which evoke indigenous bonds to national terri-

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[1] Of all ethnic minorities, Asians were barred by the United States laws from citizenship the longest. The first U.S. nationality act of 1790 grants naturalized citizenship to "free white persons" only. The act was amended in 1870 to include "persons of African nativity and descent." In 1952 the McCarren-Walter Act eliminates all racial prerequisites for citizenship, thereby permitting Asians to be naturalized, but continues national origin quotas for immigration, including minimal quotas for Asian countries and the Asiatic triangle. For detailed information about U.S. citizenship and naturalization laws (seeTakaki).

tory and history as a basis of national identity. I use the term "diaspora" to refer to a particular set of existential conditions, to a theoretical position, and to a poetics that undermines assimilationist ideologies of the United States through linguistic and poetic innovations. Loosely connected to the original reference to the dispersion of particular groups of peoples across national boundaries, the concept of diaspora in this essay is partly associated with many Asian Americans' lives as exiles, refugees, and immigrants, but is mostly related to theories developed in cultural and postcolonial studies, addressing the relations between nationalism and globalization.

In his editorial preface to the first issue of *Diaspora,* "The Nation State and Its Others," Khachig Tölölian writes, "Diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment." But he adds, "the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" (4-5). In this sense, the term "diasporas" applies to Asian Americans who remain attached to cultures, histories, and places other than those of the U.S., and who continue to be positioned as the "model minority" and at the same time as perpetual "foreigners"in mainstream American culture. The social status of Asian Americans is an example of what Etienne Balibar calls "a *normalized exception*" —the creation of a "minority" population as a result of a "nation-building politics" that naturalizes the ethnic homogeneity of the nation-state. Balibar adds that "The very existence of minorities, together with their more or less inferior status, *was a state construct*, a strict correlate of the nation-form" (53). But Asian Americans in the U.S., the nation's most rapidly growing minority, put to crisis notions of a homogenized national identity and culture of the United States, especially its assimilationist ideologies. Asian American poems of diaspora play an important role in transforming national hegemony, and in displacing national cultural homogeneity. While articulating the experience of exile, acculturation, and alienation from mainstream America, Asian American poets often reinvent poetic forms and language that radically break away from any poetic traditions, introducing into the English language sounds, rhythms, and syntax which signify cultural dislocation, disjunctive histories, and a hybrid nation-space. Thus Asian American diasporic poetry constructs an ambivalent national cultural space with an international dimension, an "outside" that is inside the nation-space. The result is what Homi Bhabha calls "a turning of boundaries and limits into the *in-between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated" ("Introduction" 4). According to Bhabha, this negotiation can reveal that

> The 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing [...] unpredictable forces for political representation. ("Introduction" 4)

This kind of subversive engagement with the cultural space of the nation-state characterizes Asian-American diasporic poetry which redefines the "inside" of the nation-space with an "outside" that transforms apparently homogeneous national history, culture, and identity. As Bhabha writes, once the "difference" of the nation-space "is turned from the boundary 'outside' to its finitude 'within', the threat of cultural difference is no longer a problem of 'other' people. It becomes a question of the otherness of the people-as-one. The national subject splits in the ethnographic perspective of culture's contemporaneity and provides both a theoretical position and a narrative authority for marginal voices or minority discourse" ("DissemiNation" 301). This repositioning of "othered" difference is profoundly enabling for minority discourse, such as Asian-American diasporic poetry, in unsettling the binary structure of power and social relations based on differences of race, gender, class, and culture.

A rethinking of difference in terms of Gilles Deleuze's concept of the relations between outside and inside, will further our understanding of the transformative and creative possibilities of Asian-American diasporic poetry. For Deleuze, "the outside is what displaces the inside, what burrows from without to effect an interiority," as Elizabeth Grosz observes (*Space* 133). The outside is an unsettling force that can revitalize the inside, and thought itself, by affecting a transformation of that which has become stale by the constraints of the homogeneous, the self-identical. The confrontation with an irreducible outside, then, produces thought as a result of an encounter with the unthought, as Deleuze writes: "Thought finds itself taken over by the exteriority of a 'belief,' outside any interiority of a 'belief,' outside any interiority of a mode of knowledge" (*Cinema 2* 175). By refusing to conform to the dominant ideology of nationalism or to traditional poetic form, Asian American poems of diaspora resist being absorbed or assimilated into mainstream American poetic traditions, while burrowing "from without" to bring changes within American poetry and the nation-space of the United States.

Marilyn Chin's poem "The Barbarians Are Coming" illustrates the ways in which Asian-American diasporic poetry challenges the national boundaries secured by racial and cultural homogeneity. Alluding to the modern Greek poet C.P. Cavafy's poem, "Waiting for the Barbarians," Chin's poem transgresses the boundaries between the "barbarians" as other, outsider, and us citizens of a "civilized" nation. One of Chin's major strategies for unsettling the binary distinction between "them" and "us," is destabilizing the subject position for naming. The phrase "the barbarians are coming" also evokes the old Chinese perspective on self and other. The Great Wall, completed during the Qin Dynasty (221–206 B.C.), was built to keep the barbarians out. In Chin's poem, the Chinese who named Westerners "barbarians" are themselves called "barbarians" in North America. The racialized boundaries between self and other eventually collapse as people of different races meet and mix in a new frontier. Chin creates a sense of urgency and crisis by opening the poem with a compelling scene of the barbarians' approaching calvalry:

> War chariots thunder, horses neigh, *the barbarians are coming*.
> What are you waiting for, young nubile women pointing at the wall, *the barbarians are coming*.

> They have heard about a weakened link in the wall. *So the barbarians have ears among us*.
> So deceive yourself with illusions: you are only one woman, holding one broken brick in the wall.
> So deceive yourself with illusions: as if you matter, that brick and that wall.
> *The barbarians are coming*: they have red beards or beardless with a top knot.
> *The barbarians are coming*: they are your fathers, brothers, teachers, lovers*;* and they are clearly an other. (19)

The poem begins with a dramatization of Chinese immigrants' anxiety about and resistance to assimilation, and their illusion that individuals can preserve cultural and racial purity. But as the poem unfolds, the anxiety about the presence of the "barbarians" is shifted to white America, as the pronoun switches from the second-person singular or plural, to first-person singular, and to third-person plural. This switching of pronouns pluralizes the speaking voice and destabilizes the position of the speaking subject(s), thus rendering the speakers' identities ambivalent. In Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians," the barbarians are the other, the outsider, but in Chin's poem, the barbarians are among us. In fact, the racial and cultural boundaries between them and us are blurred, as are the subject positions of the namer and the named, for the barbarians are both Caucasians ("they have red beards") and Asians ("or beardless with a top knot"). This merging of different peoples subverts any belief in racial and cultural purity, and Chin's mixing of vastly disparate historical moments and places —ancient China and contemporary America— and her allusions to the Greek poet Cavafy (1863–1933) and the Chinese Daoist scholar Chuang Tzu (circa. 300 B.C.) in presenting the American experience, disturb nationalist ideologies that seek to construct essentialist identities of race, nation, and culture.

This hybridity in Chin's poem gives rise to what Bhabha calls "the disjunctive temporalities of the national culture," locating people in "a performative time," and thus destroying "the constant principles of the national culture that attempt to hark back to a 'true' national past, which is often represented in the reified forms of realism and stereotype" ("DissemiNation" 302–303). In the second half of the poem, Chin shifts the point of view of the poem from the Chinese and Chinese immigrants' perspective on barbarians to that of mainstream America on Chinese immigrants, by incorporating Daoist views on names and naming from a passage in *Lao Tzu*, composed by Chuang Tzu. In that passage, Lao Tzu, is called "ill-bred" by a visitor who thinks him too frugal with food, but Lao Tzu is indifferent to the name-calling. When asked why, he says:

> 'The titles of clever, wise, divine, holy are things that I have long ago cast aside, as a snake sheds its skin. Yesterday if you had called me an ox, I should have accepted the name of ox; if you had called me a horse, I should have accepted the name of horse. Wherever there is a substance and men give it a name, it would do well to accept that name; for it will in any case be subject to the prejudice that attaches to the name.' (qtd. in Waley 17)

Chin introduces Lao Tzu's Daoist attitude toward naming and names into her poem, thus producing a transition from the fear of the barbarians and illusion about racial and cultural purity, to the barbarians' defiance of their naming by those of the dominant culture in the nation-space:

> *The barbarians are coming*:
> If you call me a horse, I must be a horse.
> If you call me a bison, I am equally guilty.
>
> When a thing is true and is correctly described, one doubles the blame by not admitting it: so, Chuangtzu, himself, was a barbarian king!
> Horse, horse, bison, bison, *the barbarians are coming*—and how they love to come.
> The smells of the great frontier exult in them. (19)
>
> *after Cavafy*

With this change of perspective from those who feel threatened by the barbarians to the barbarians themselves, the feelings of anxiety and perplexity give way to a sense of confidence and stimulation. At the same time, the fear of impending disaster brought by the arrival of the barbarians is replaced by an excitement about the unknown, stimulated by the presence of the barbarians. Chin's use of Daoism in her poem displaces the "inside" of an essentialist national identity with an "outside" that offers a mode of thinking that disturbs what Deleuze calls the "interiority of a 'belief'" from outside the "interiority of a mode of knowledge." Thus, rather than being absorbed into the dominant nationalist ideology of assimilation or poetic tradition, Chin's poem maintains an "outside" that refuses to conform, even as it resolutely situates itself in the nation-space of the U.S.

Chin's poetics, then, is similar to what Bhabha refers to as "Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries —both actual and conceptual— disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities." Through such essentialist national ideological manoeuvres, Bhabha adds, "the difference of space returns as the Sameness of time, turning Territory into Tradition, turning the People into One" ("DissemiNation" 300). The cultural difference which Chin's poem articulates is a form of intervention in the construction of the singularity of a nation and its citizenry in a homogeneus time-space. This intervention in the homogenized nation-space is central to the theoretical position of diasporic discourse, which constructs alternative forms of community consciousness and identity affiliations "outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference," as Clifford says of Paul Gilroy's formulation of the functions of African diasporic discourse in the nation-space of Great Britain (251). In this sense, Clifford contends, "the term 'diaspora' is a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement" (252). Along with their displacement, diasporas' transnational attachment, Clifford notes, subverts the "nation-state, as common territory and time" (250). Diaspora discourse, then, urges a reconceptualization of national identity in

terms of national history and culture constructed in a linear, homogenous time-space.

The transnational attachment of Filipino American poetry is particularly subversive in its insistence on confronting colonial histories, and on investigating issues of language, culture, and identity within power relations. Although Filipinos have been American "nationals" since 1898, the year the United States annexed the Philippines, they, like other Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, were denied authentic national membership and citizens' rights on the basis of "race." Almost all Filipino American poets write extensively about Filipino history and culture, particularly the colonization of the Philippines by Spain and the U.S. and its consequences. The issues they explore include ethnographical authority in representing the other, and the authenticity of "ethnic" culture as a marker of racial distinctions. In her poem, "No Tasaday," Catalina Cariaga gives voice to the silent, displaced indigenous Filipinos by alluding to the ethnographical "hoax" about the Tasaday, a group of twenty-six "primitive" people on the Island of Mindanao of the Philippines, who were supposed to have had no contact with the outside world until 1971. Two documentary films were made about their first encounters with outsiders, *Contact with the Tasaday in 1971* and *Cave People of the Philippines* (1972). This supposedly extraordinary anthropological discovery has been denounced as a "hoax." In August 1986 ABC 20/20 aired a program, "The Tribe that Never Was,"about the Tasaday story. Catalina uses references to the Tasaday and related materials to question ethnographical authority and the nature of representation, to critique colonization, and eventually to identify herself with the "primitive" people. Citing from Jean-Paul Dumont's *Cultural Anthropology* (1988) and a 1986 *ABC News* report about the Tasaday as her epigraph, Cariaga begins the poem by evoking the dispute over the Tasaday as a tribe of "gentle" people whose language had no words such as "war" or "paradise," and by referring to the documentary films about the Tasaday as "a cruel hoax" created by "flawed methodology" and motivated by "greed" (*Cultural Evidence* 44-45). But in juxtaposition to the denouncement of the existence of Tasaday "cavemen,"Cariaga inscribes one indisputable fact about indigenous Filipinos before their encounter with Westerners:

> It was all false.
> But this much was true;
> and this part, I believe, pure intuition;
> and this, we already knew
> before the authorities arrived:
>
> with little time for writing, pottery, artifacts or cave decoration,
> the people developed a highly sophisticated and elaborate art
> of telling entertainingly tall tales. (45)

At issue is the question of "truth" and "fiction," the conditions for their production, and the subject positions which mediate that production. In contrast to the political and personal motivations for the construction of the anthropological hoax of the Tasaday, the indigenous people's telling of "tall tales" serves a totally different function in their society.

Rather than relying on argumentative rhetoric or logical reasoning, Cariaga uses collage juxtaposition to undermine ethnographical authority, and to evoke disjunctive histories that suggest connections between ethnography and colonialism. She juxtaposes photo captions about the Tasaday cavemen from *National Geographic* with a list of English words, allowing the meanings and values of the words to reveal and resonate one another, and to pose questions about the underlying assumptions of the photo captions:

> "*Nothing is more gentle than man in his primitive state," wrote French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. His theory about the human condition seems borne out by the Tasaday child and his defenseless kin, who must now depend on the protection of 20th Century man for their very survival as a people.*
> –photo caption, "Stone Age Cavemen of Mindanao" *National Geographic* (1972)

Stone

tribe

hoax

memorable

nation

(g)God(s)

[...]

methodology

true

tale.

> *The camera's intrusive stare erases the normally friendly open-faced look of the Tasadays. Bamboo water vessels lie on the ledge.*
> –photo caption, "Stone Age Cavemen of Mindanao" *National Geographic* (1972)

Breasts
        monogamous

primitive
        gentle

[...]

Jungle
        rain forest

1972
        1492

fierce
        genteel

genitals
        thighs

Real
        distant. (46–49)

This juxtaposition reveals that it is Western authorities of anthropology who are speaking for the Tasaday, telling us how they are characteristically "primitive"; it is Western technology of photography that shows us the "real" cavemen; and it is Western ethnographical methodology that is producing the "truth" about the Tasaday whose mute bodies embody their primitiveness and helplessness defined according to the values of the "civilized" world. The individual words listed as they are, enhance their culturally determined meanings and values, while suggesting that only fragments of these "real" people are captured in the photographs and texts, thus further problematizing ethnographical representation of the other, revealing that the otherness of the Tasaday is an effect of power relations. At the same time, the juxtaposition of words such as "1972" (the year the Western anthropologists "discovered" the Tasaday) with "1492" (the year Columbus "discovered" North America) evokes encounters between the colonial powers and the indigenous peoples and the brutality committed by the "civilized" world against "primitive" peoples. Thus the history of colonialism ironically resonates in the ethnographical representation of the "cavemen."

In the last part of "No Tasaday," Cariaga firmly situates the issue of representation in power relations, and the absence of a tribe of gentle Tasaday takes on a new meaning. Again, Cariaga achieves this development and compelling effect through juxtaposition:

> *Any conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them' is a conversation in which 'them' is silenced. As in much anthropological writing, 'them' always stands on the other side of the hill, naked, and speechless, barely present in its absence.*
> –Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (1991)

"whose" and "which" implies people
belonging / of

        [...]

in a rain forest
    stripped of its trees

by sloped hills,
    its minerals pilfered

    on real people, the name of "the tribe" invented,
    imposed, then, disposed of

siblings teasing the youngest child:

    little brown girl in the Magazine
looks a lot like me—
    could be cousins. (50–51)

Images of the luxuriant rain forest described at the beginning of the poem —"purple orchids, / mahogany thicker than a cityscape of buildings [...]" (44)— have disappeared by the end. The land and its riches have been plundered, and the native people displaced. Rather than an anthropological "hoax" that created a tribe that never was, the story of the Tasaday becomes an allegory of colonialism and global capitalism. Moreover, the "primitive" people are no longer constrained in the distance from "us." That "naked" and "speechless" other, standing "on the other side of the hill," is articulating her views, giving voice to what has been silenced, from here, in the "civilized" world, and from the nation-space of the United States, while nonetheless remaining resolutely attached to that of the other world: "little brown girl in the Magazine / looks a lot like me —/ could be cousins." This identification with displaced Pacific islanders is a mode of resistance to assimilation characteristic of diasporic discourses, which Clifford notes, "can take the form of reclaiming another nation that has been lost, elsewhere in space and time, but that is powerful as a political formation here and now" (251).

Reclaiming another nation and language that have been lost as a result of colonization is a major theme in many Filipino American poems. Situated in the context of Filipino history, Filipino American poets' anti-assimilation themes and poetics are particularly poignant. Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, American colonialist ambition led to the Philippine-American War from 1899 to 1902. In 1901, the year the President of the first Philippine Republic, Emilio Aguinaldo, leader of the "Insurrection," was captured, "the U.S. transport ship *Thomas* arrived in Manila Bay carrying five hundred young American teachers whose mission was to 'educate, uplift, and civilize' the Filipinos," as Nick Carbó points out in his introduction to an anthology of poems by Filipino and Filipino American writers, *Returning A Borrowed Tongue* (III). Imposing the English language and the American education system on Filipinos was a crucial part of U.S. colonization of the Philippines "in the disguise of the policy of Benevolent Assimilation." Indigenous languages were suppressed and forbidden in the classrooms "because of their presumed inferiority." Through this policy of "Benevolent Assimilation," English becomes the "preferred" and most widely used language in every aspect of Filipino life, and American popular

culture replaces indigenous cultures (Carbó III). Filipino American diasporic poetry articulates Filipinos' and Filipino Americans' protests against colonization, while revealing the effects of colonization. Reclaiming their lost language and culture is a gesture of resistance to assimilation and a process of decolonization. In his poem, "The Light in One's Blood," Gemino H. Abad confronts Filipinos' loss of their mother tongue, and examines their colonized subjectivity. The poem begins with the speaker's recognition of the apparently impossible task for Filipinos to reclaim their language and to regain their intellectual and spiritual independence:

> To seek our way of thinking
> by which our country is found,
> I know but do not know,
> for its language too is lost.
> To find our trail up a mountain
> without a spirit guide—
> here is no space where words in use
> might stake a claim.
>
> Speaking is fraught with other speech.
> Through all our fathers, Spain
> and America had invented our souls
> and wrought our land and history.
> How shall I think counter to the thick originating grain of their thought?
> "I have not made or accepted
> their words. My voice holds them at bay." (3)

The citation at the end of the second passage counters the speaker's doubt and despair. Following this defiant voice, the speaker turns "without words" to look at the bloody history of Filipinos' insurrections (4). As the poem develops with the speaker's meditation on the acquisition of language and the history of Filipinos' resistance to Spanish and American colonization, the speaker realizes that the same language can be used to tell "another tale," and that "We must know our loss" in order to repossess our language and land: "We must even fall from our own sky / to find our earth again" (5). For Filipino and Filipino American poets, recognition of their colonized subjectivity through the colonizer's language is an enabling condition for resistance to assimilation and for their creativity.

In her poem, "Alphabet Soup," subtitled "Mimicry as Second Language," Fatima Lim-Wilson uses the order of the English alphabet to organize her poem. The resulting straight-jacket-like structure enhances the relentlessness in the imposition of English on the Filipinos. The inflexible order of the lines also suggests the speaker's rigid imitation of the colonial "master" at the expense of becoming a deformed half-human:

> Angel of letters, feed me.
> Beat your wings till I remember
> Cardboard cut-outs of ABCs. Why
> Does my memory hobble, lift

Empty pails from an English castle's dark well?
Fill me with the welter of vowels,
[...............................]
Slash away till I warble, silvery voiced with a cut
Tongue. I grow, a hunchback, trailing my master,
Unctuous and anxious. Sweet, mute angel, cast your
Veil over me to muffle my voice of broken glass.
With your flaming sword, mark me, with a bloody
X to form my lips into singing, always, a heartfelt
Yes. Spewing baubles, I become the favored one. In this
Zoo of sycophants, I'm the parrot who's almost human. (147)

As in Abad's poem, the speaker is confronting the painful experience of being a colonized subject. But unlike Abad's speaker who recognizes the possibility of reinventing Filipino identity and language, Lim-Wilson's speaker is imprisoned in the rigid order of the English alphabet. Even though she demonstrates mastery of the English language, her performance is only mimicry, and her deformity embodies her colonized subjectivity. The correlation between her ability to keep the perfect order of the English language, and her state of being "the parrot who's almost human,"not only exposes the dehumanizing practice of colonization, it also suggests that for Filipino American poets to be creative and to emerge as new subjects, they must break away from the conventional rules of the English language.

Michael Melo's poem, "Unlearning English," enacts a process of learning Tagalog as a way of unlearning English. Although he organizes his lines into uneven stanzas apparently according to the English alphabetic order, the letters actually stand for sounds of Tagalog. By arranging his poem into fragmentary stanzas in the alphabetic order, Melo actually frees his poem from the seemingly confining sequence, refusing to begin each sentence with the particular letter, but rather using the letter as subject matter or springboard for the topic of the stanza:

A
Not "ay." Ah. *Adobo*.
Ang pagod natin. All this effort
makes me ache —why did I forget?

B
Why weren't the words burned
in my brain? B. The sheep
says "ba." Bawal umihi dito.
Don't break *balut* on the wall.
Boiled duck embryo in leathery shell,
it smells bad. It is also bad
to forget where you came from.

K
There is no c in Tagalog.
Kah, ka. No-ka.

Kabit ano man, whatever the cost,
ka-kainin ko ang kaong,
I will eat the candied coconut see.

[........................]

H
Ha. Haba. How long
has it been since I felt the harness
of language around my head?
The taste of a Tagalog heaven
to me, whose sense of country has been long
replaced by *Hogan's Heroes*.
Happy Days. (152-53)

This process of at once learning Tagalog and unlearning English is a process of decolonization, of reclaiming Filipino history and culture. The complexity of this process increases as the poem moves freely from commentary to memory, from narrative to meditation. At the end of the poem, the process of unlearning English resonates ironically and subversively with "unlearned English":

Near Clark
Air Force Base, a street
where whores are as plentiful
as rain, where any day you may die
from guerillas while on a *kalesa* to Luneta—
you remember your voice
because you are American
because you are a dark Pilipino-American
and that they will *balison* your tongue
because they can tell you speak
unlearned English. (155–56)

The presence of dangerous "guerillas" contrasts the sight of numerous "whores" near the U.S. Air Force Base, while the "American" identity is immediately revealed to be comprised of a racialized hierarchy. These contrasts also suggest a connection between colonization and racism, between the colonized Filipinos and the second-class citizenship of the "dark Pilipino-American" whose otherness is marked by his skin color and his "unlearned English." These closing lines render unlearning English even more necessary and subversive.

Otherness as a repressed or subordinate condition can be turned into a subversive position of the exiled and marginalized. Like Chinese and Filipino American diasporic poetry, Vietnamese American poems reveal that Asian Americans feelings' of displacement and exile are not simply a matter of nostalgia. They are in part at least the result of racism that Asian immigrants and refugees encounter in the U.S. In his prose poem, "lessons," Truong Tran tactfully relates the Vietnamese refugees' learning of English to their impositions in the nation-space of the U.S.

Ironically, this poem about the learning of English refuses to obey the grammatical rules, including those of punctuation. The poem is divided into seven passages, each according to a topic indicated by a subhead:

remembered

he taught p.e. my first period english my third stood at the chalkboard told jokes that weren't funny rationed vocabulary like army issued cigarettes twenty words a week *spell identify define noun verb adjective a person place or thing an action or occurrence a word describing another word*

taught

tuberculosis—the webster definition n. a serious infectious disease that attacks many parts of the body esp. the lungs the teacher's definition n. a disease caused by boat people spitting on sidewalks (40)

The fragmentary, decontextualized, meaningless way of learning English in the first passage is juxtaposed with another way of learning the language in a value-ridden context in the second. The contrast of these two different experiences foregrounds the fact that the teaching of the English language is not purely a linguistic exercise; it can be a process of teaching the boundaries between "us" and "them," a process of marking the other as a threat, an undesirable presence that endangers "our" well being.

These two modes of learning English at school are ironically contrasted with two other ways of learning the language at home. As important as the place of national public education, is the place of home, supposed to be a private space, a place of refuge. But for Vietnamese Americans, home, like school, has become a place that reminds them of their alienation and their loss:

learned

always the first my mother would wake to make the breakfast water the herbs find words painted black on the garage door she without knowing knew exactly what was meant *gooks* a person place or thing *go* an action or occurrence *away* a word describing

found

black paint on wood is *easily* concealed in the mind...
the adverb not taught [i discovered it by accident]

neglected

on the refrigerator door a note that read *phài nói tiêng viêt ótrong nhà này—you are to speak in vietnamese while in this house* (*Accents* 41)

In contrast to the mechanical way of learning linguistic rules of English, the mother learns the language by encountering the assault of racist slurs and threats spray-painted on their garage door. So does the son learn the meaning and usage of the adverb "away" by finding at home the racist epithet against him and his family. Both what is "found" at home and "taught" at school tells the boy that he is unwanted because of his Vietnamese identity. Not surprisingly, the note on the refrigerator door is "neglected."

The social alienation and cultural dislocation of Vietnamese Americans in the U.S. are reflected in their relations to the English and Vietnamese languages. As Tran writes in another poem, "equivalent": "my father's broken english / my vietnamese tongue / discarded resewn // no stitch will hold / no thread will mend" (*Accents* 45). However, like Filipino American poets, Tran reclaims his mother tongue in poetry. In his title poem, "placing the accents," Tran engages in a dialogue with his dead father, while inserting Vietnamese in the poem and acknowledging that the poem is written under the guidance of the mother and in memory of the father: "she embroidered the accents onto this paper cloth / as you would have done with chisel hammer / your voice demanding *it's time you learn*" (*Accents* 31). In employing the gestures of embroidery and hammer to secure the Vietnamese "accents" in the poem, Tran empathetically reclaims his ethnic heritage and articulates resistance to assimilation. As Clifford writes: "The language of diaspora is increasingly invoked by displaced peoples who feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home. This sense of connection must be strong enough to resist erasure through the normalizing processes of forgetting, assimilating, and distancing." Moreover, Clifford adds that diasporic language "appears to be replacing, or at least supplementing, minority discourse. Transnational connections break the binary relation of 'minority' communities with 'majority' societies —a dependency that structures projects of both assimilation and resistance" (255). Languages in Asian American poems of diaspora are intricately related to issues of identity and power relations. The mixing of different languages in these poems challenges national identity based on a common language and a homogeneous culture.

The Korean American poet Myung Mi Kim's poetry best illustrates this breaking down of the binary through diasporic language. Like Marilyn Chin, Kim undermines the boundaries between the "them" and "us," which sustains the binary structure of the minority and majority cultures. But she does so through a poetics that is more language oriented. Although her attention to language is similar to Filipino and Vietnamese American poets' concerns with language in terms of power and displacement, Kim is more experimental with the materiality of language. In addition to inserting Korean into her poems, Kim seeks to "address/hear/notate in an English that is inflected by a Korean," as she says in an interview. Being aware of the "questions of authority and knowledge" in language, she interrogates in her poetry, "the questions of translation between cultures and languages and in particular the kinds of resemblances and contaminations that inform how language(s) systematize and engender notions of power" ("Interview" 94). In her poems, Kim invents a diasporic language

whose music transforms the English language and traditional English lyric poetry. Take for example the opening poem, "And Sing We," of her first volume *Under Flag*:

> Must it ring so true
> So we must sing it
>
> To span even yawning distance
> And would we be near then
>
> What would the sea be, if we were near it
>
>   Voice
>
> It catches its underside and drags it back
>
> What sound do we make, "n', "h', "g"
>
> Speak and it is sound in time
>
> Depletion replete with barraging
>
> Slurred and taken over
>
> Diaspora. "It is not the picture
>
> That will save us."
>
> All the fields fallow
>
> The slide carousel's near burn-out and yet
>
> Flash and one more picture of how we were to be
>
> [..........................] (*Flag* 13–14)

The discontinuous lines and multiple voices enact a diasporic experience of time and space. Into the disjunctive place and time, Kim introduces Korean sounds together with involuntary memories of home, triggered by smell:

> And this breaks through unheralded—
>
> Sardines browned to a crisp over charcoal is memory smell
> elicited from nothing
>
> Falling in that way

Um-pah, um-pah sensibility of the first grade teacher, feet firm
on the pump organ's pedals, we flap our wings, butterfly wings,
butterfly butterfly, fly over here

Once we leave a place is it there (*Flag* 14)

While recreating the experience of home which Korean immigrants have left through the music of language, Kim raises questions about home and its location for immigrants, without offering answers. Rather, she explores "the interplay between prosody (sound value, rhythms, cadences) and "time' —perception" as a way of recreating the experience of dislocation. By attending to time in terms of the "speed, "duration," and "music" in the poetic language inflected by Korean "accents," she is attempting to capture the kind of experience that appears to be distorted by linear, chronological time (Interview 94). Thus the moment when "we" were watching slides which showed "how we were to be" in the new country is juxtaposed (with much space in between on the page) with the moment when we are "over here," missing home and reliving memories of the past in another place.

Using displaced and altered English sounds, Kim captures Korean immigrants' fragmentary memories of home and their sense of dislocation in a land where they can not longer trace their ancestry. As she invents a new prosody in English to render the experience of diaspora visceral through linguistic music, Kim allows the diasporic subjects to confront the loss of their singularity as a people, and of their sense of a single, whole cultural heritage:

Prattle (heard, found, made) in kitchen
No longer clinking against the sides of the pot set to boil

Prattle displaced. Guard birds

That should have been near, all along

Prattle done trattle gone just how far

Do voices carry

What we might have explored, already discovered

Falling down falling down

Callback fallback whip whippoorwill

Not the one song to rivet us trundle rondo

Not a singular song trundle rondo

What once came to us whole

In this we are again about to do

In the times it take to dead dead dead la la la

Trundle rondo for a long time it stood marker and marked

Mostly, we cross bridges we did not see being built (*Flag* 15)

With what used to be familiar voices of prattle in the kitchen displaced, "we" find the songs we hear no longer the ones that can be traced back to a common ancestry or culture, as we realize we are not the pioneers of the land where we live now. The singing of London Bridge (or perhaps some other structure) "falling down falling down" is interrupted by a different song with a disparate rhythm and cadence: "Callback fallback whip whippoorwill." These songs are intermingled with the once singularly Korean music, "trundle rondo." As Korean immigrants cultural identity loses its traceable origins in a land where they can claim no "natural" bond through lineage, the "outside" they bring with them disturbs the national cultural homogeneity of the U.S. nation-space.

Kim's poems of diaspora seek to interrogate and transform the American national identity, while resisting assimilation through interlingual and disjunctive poetics. In "Into Such Assembly," for example, Kim employs collage juxtaposition to expose the contradictions in the process of being "naturalized" as an U.S. citizen, and to articulate an alternative conception of belonging, which does not seek to erase difference or reduce complexity. The first part of the poem at once enacts the official procedure of naturalizing aliens into citizens, and subverts the procedure and its underlying assumptions:

Can you read and write English? Yes______. No______.
Write down the following sentences in English as I dictate them.
There is a dog in the road.
It is raining.
Do you renounce allegiance to any other country but this?
Now tell me, who is the president of the United States?
You will all stand now. Raise your right hands.

Cable car rides over swan flecked ponds

red lacquer chests in our slateblue house
Chrysanthemums trailing bloom after bloom
[.................................]
So-Sah's thatched roofs shading miso hung to dry —
Sweet potatoes grow on the rock choked side of the mountain
The other, the pine wet green side of the mountain
Hides a lush clearing where we picnic and sing:
Sung-Bul-Sah, geep eun bahm ae

Neither, neither

Who is mother tongue, who is father country? (29)

Kim's incorporation of a Korean song in the Korean language contrasts the official dictation of English, relating the acquisition and usage of English to state power in the process of "naturalizing" and assimilating "aliens." In response to authoritative demands of the nation-state for loyalty pledge as a prerequisite for naturalized American citizenship, Kim juxtaposes a passage of apparently Korean immigrants' nostalgic memories of home with colorful sights and pleasant smell of happy, peaceful everyday life in Korea.[2] But her references to Korea's colonization by Japan and to U.S. military and political interventions in Korea, as well as to Korean students' demonstrations against American impositions in the proceeding poems, indicate that Korean immigrants are deprived of such a home country as presented in the second passage to claim loyalty to. Kim foregrounds the ambivalence of Korean immigrants' national and cultural identities in the provocative ending lines of this first part of the poem: "Neither, neither // Who is mother tongue, who is father country?". The double negative and the questions resist the binarized choice of either this or that category of national, cultural identification.

In the second part of the poem, Kim explores Korean immigrants' alienating process of becoming Americans as a result of mainstream America's prejudice against the "other." Again, Kim uses juxtaposition to reveal and to counter the stereotypical assumptions about Korea and Koreans:

Do they have trees in Korea? Do the children eat out of garbage cans?

We had a dalmation
We rode the train on weekend from Seoul to So-Sah where we grew grapes

We ate on the patio surrounded by dahlias

Over there, ass is cheap —those girls live to make you happy

Over there, we had a slatedblue house with a flat roof where
I made many snowmen, over there (30)

Following these juxtaposed utterances, Kim introduces a passage that describes the process of learning the English language. Then in response to the importance of geographical location and the inquisition of the English language in the formation of national, cultural identities, Kim raises questions about the consequences of diaspora and its related epistemological and ontological questions:

[2] In her insightful reading of "Into Such Assembly," Hyun Yi Kang considers the second passage "an impassive and ironic cataloguing of some of most sedimented Orientalist signifiers [...]" The seemingly nostalgic portrayal of Korea and Korean life, Kang contends, is just one of "the several competing discourses which impose themselves on the bilingual immigrant"(see Kang, 257).

And with distance traveled, as part of it

How often when it rains here does it rain there?

One gives over to a language and then

What was given, given over? (30)

These questions are central to the relations between diaspora and national identity. Rather than offering any direct answers to the questions, Kim moves beyond Korean immigrants' experience to suggest an alternative view of who "we" are as Americans in contrast to that reinforced by the state power described in the first part of the poem.

Evoking the indiscriminatory nature of the rain, Kim re-articulates an inclusive vision of "our" identity that encompasses all of us across ethnic, national, and geographical boundaries:

This rain eats into most anything

And when we had been scattered over the fact of earth
We could not speak to one another

The creak rises, the rain-fed current rises

Color given up, sap given up
Weeds branches groves what they make as one

[..............................]

What gives way losing gulch, mesa, peak, state, nation

Land, ocean dissolving
The continent and the peninsula, the peninsula and the continent
Of one piece sweeping

One table laden with one crumb
Every mouthful off a spoon whole
Each drop strewn into such assembly (31)

This "assembly" of us —all of us from all corners of the world— undermines the insistence on a monolingual, uniformed national identity, and subverts the hierarchal binary constructs of "us" over here and "them" over there as alluded to in the first two parts of the poem. In this assembly there is no hierarchy of race, culture, or nationality, no preordained binary social order, no established center to which the new, the different must conform. As the title "Into Such Assembly" suggests, Kim's poem of diaspora aims to reconceptualize national and cultural identities, rather than proposing an identity of the exile in opposition to the national identity.

The result of the latter may leave racialized national power structure intact, and essentialized cultural identities undisturbed.

By insisting on developing a multi-cultural, interlingual poetics, Kim, and the other Asian American poets discussed above, open up a diasporic subject position that rejects binary relations between majority and minority cultures. Their anti-assimilationist positionality is similar to what Elizabeth Grosz refers to as the "marginalized position of the exile," which "automatically has access to (at least) two different kinds of discourse and history, one defined by exclusion from a social mainstream; and one provided autonomously, from its own history and self-chosen representations." This position, Grosz adds, is "uniquely privileged in terms of social transgression and renewal" ("Judaism" 69-70). However, this transgressive and transformative effect is possible, Grosz points out, only when the exile resists total assimilation and exclusion by the mainstream. As she writes: "To be homogenized, absorbed into the *status quo* is to be neutralized, to be disconnected from the history of one's oppression; yet to be expelled or ejected from culture is to leave the ejecting culture intact; and at the same time to abandon all hope of a positive self-definition because it is to abandon any position" ("Judaism" 69). The position of the exile, then, cannot afford to lose its foothold in the nation-state if it is to be a politically enabling and culturally productive and transformative position. Asian American poetry of diaspora assumes this position of the exile inside the nation-space to engage, challenge, and intervene in the assimilationist ideology and hegemonic culture of the United States. In doing so, it carries out the task David Palumbo-Liu formulates for minority culture: "It is a specific task for minority discourse to ascertain the interpenetration of minor and dominant cultures, and to see that reconfiguration as a site of a politicized aesthetics" (202). Speaking as the other who has intruded the domestic space of the U.S. nation-state, Asian American poets are transforming the once Eurocentric American culture and poetry, while inventing new poetic forms and language, as well as inscribing histories of other times and places.

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