



“My body is its image, here”: Diasporic Identity and the Deconstruction of Binary Division in 21st Century Asian American Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the poems of Franny Choi and Victoria Chang within the context of Asian American poetry, poetics, and criticism. It demonstrates how Choi and Chang’s work engage in a destabilization of binaries in order to rewrite and re-construct Asian American identity. A close reading of Choi’s “Chatroulette” from her collection, *Soft Science*, and Chang’s “Home” from her collection, *Obit*, reveals disruptions of five binary divisions, broadly identified as “high” poetic form and “low” poetic form, Eastern and Western, English and non-English, embodiment and disembodiment, and past and present. This paper argues that the deconstructions of these five binaries represent a search for belonging in the context of Asian American identity, as it is an identity that itself transverses the boundaries of “Asian” and “American.” This is supported by scholars of Asian American literature such as Michael Leong, Brigitte Wallinger-Schorn, and Zhou Xiaojing, who investigate how Asian American poets navigate alterity and cultural hybridity through innovation. It concludes by examining questions of home and belonging, theorizing that, for Asian American poets, reinventing language in a way that transgresses binaries and dichotomies allows for the construction of a new “home” that accepts the indeterminacies of identity, life, and death rather than resisting them.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term “Asian American” inherently defies binary, as Asian Americans inhabit a space which cannot be accurately described as merely “Asian” nor “American.” Thus, any attempt to force Asian American individuals into a crude dichotomy will fail, as the identity itself cannot be understood as a single thing, but rather, it represents a nebulous, multifarious space of indeterminacy. Asian American poets, who are denied a “home” in a discrete, self-contained unity or community, have adopted the task of constructing a new, linguistic “home,” which allows them to inhabit spaces in between binary divisions. Franny Choi’s collection, *Soft Science*, and Victoria Chang’s collection, *Obit*, both grapple with the struggle of escaping the oppression of the binary. In particular, the poems from these collections—“Chatroulette,” “Home,” and “I can’t say with faith”—oppose

binary oppositions in both content and form. I identify five main binaries or tensions which these poems navigate, including prestige (“high” form v. “low” form), geography (“East” v. “West”), language (“English” v. “non-English”), the body (inhabited v. uninhabited), and the archive (past v. present). I argue that Choi and Chang’s poems fully destabilize all of these binaries, thereby inventing a new, distinctly Asian American “home” embedded in language, writing, and poetry.

Asian American poetry not only disrupts these five binaries but constructs a space of safety, home, and beauty within the grey space between distinctions supposed to be black and white. Choi and Chang challenge the line between “high” poetic forms (prestigious forms with institutional power) and “low” poetic forms (common forms with less power) through playing with formal conventions and

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juxtaposing disparate forms. In doing so, they invent new formal atmospheres which exist comfortably as neither wholly “high” nor “low.” Similarly, Chang draws upon both “Western” (Anglo-European) and “Eastern” (East Asian) poetics and philosophies in order to construct a uniquely Asian American style, which indicates the impossibility of understanding “Eastern” and “Western” culture as discrete, unrelated units. At the same time, both poets grapple with writing in America’s dominant language while having parents of marginalized linguistic backgrounds. Chang’s use of Mandarin and Choi’s examination of English-language “impersonation” break down the barrier between English and other languages. The poets also question the nature of the body, contending that the “self” (or identity) is also a part of the body. For Choi and Chang, the consequence of “racial dissociation” (the construction of a false self in order to protect oneself from racism) is a feeling of bodily dis-inhabitation, thus opposing the idea of the body as either fully dissociated or fully inhabited. Finally, the poetry blurs the distinction between the past, present, and future, as both Choi and Chang build a poetic archive constituted by both memories of the past and hopes for the future. The disruption of all of these binaries symbolizes the nature of Asian American identity—for Asian Americans to find a “home,” they must exist in between the divisive categories of “Asian” and “American.”

2. PRESTIGE: RETHINKING “HIGH FORM” AND “LOW FORM”

Both *Soft Science* and *Obit* utilize a variety of forms—such as tanka, sonnets, and obituaries—all of which disrupt the binary division between “high” and “low” forms of poetry. “High” forms of poetry usually have institutional power (in education, politics, and literary studies), are popular in elite circles, and have a long tradition of being revered as an important art form. On the other hand, “low” forms of poetry represent traits opposite these: namely, a lack of institutional or popular recognition as a deep and complex form of art. For Choi’s *Soft Science*,

the destabilization of “high” and “low” poetry occurs largely in the parallel tensions within form and content. For example, her poem “Chatroulette” is a crown of sonnets, and while it adheres rather strictly to an iambic pentameter, it is almost entirely unrhymed. The use of sonnets here directly calls upon a form which “has been held up as poetry’s epitome...and a cultural talisman” due to both “English imperial power” and its ability to adapt to contemporary readers (Cousins and Howarth 1). While the sonnet form therefore enjoys a status as an archetypal “high” poetic form, Choi plays with the strict, formal rules of traditional sonnets in order to reinvent it in a form beyond the limiting binary of “high” and “low.” This is evident from the first stanza:

To see, to come, I brought myself online.
O dirty church. O two-way periscope,
Refractory for Earth’s most skin-starved
cocks.
O hungry sons of helicopter palms
In hopeful carousel. (“Chatroulette” 1–5)

The first line—even the first set of words—establishes the metric atmosphere in a distinct, almost-exaggerated manner due to the commas which separate the feet: “To see, to come, I brought myself online.” Yet the rhyming departs from this formal compliance completely, as most of the lines do not rhyme at all. Furthermore, the end rhymes that do appear are erratic and sparse; for example, the third sonnet roughly follows an ABCC DEFG HIHJ KK pattern, made entirely of half-rhymes (29–42). While many different styles of sonnet exist, they all generally use a strict rhyme scheme, such as ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, and they seldom use half-rhymes. Thus, in “Chatroulette,” the sonnet form itself becomes a site of indeterminacy, as the poem balances a strict meter typical of traditional sonnets and an amorphous rhyme scheme which departs from these formal conventions. The formal ambiguity parallels the content of the poem, in which a lexicon of disgust (“dirty,” “foul,” “filthy,” “disgusting,” “rot”) contrasts a simultaneous lexicon of religion (“church,” “congregations,” “god,”

“marry,” “christen”) (“Chatroulette” 2, 10–11, 14, 22, 32, 45). Just as the sonnet form becomes deconstructed within the poem through both resisting and adhering to formal conventions, the lexical tension fuses the high, elevated theme of religion with a manifold exploration of decay, hunger, and filth. The poem is neither “high” nor “low:” it seamlessly blends a prestigious, elite form with subversion, rule-breaking, and ambiguity. Thus, “Chatroulette” opposes the distinction between “high” and “low” poetry through its ambivalence toward its own form, which expresses a simultaneous disgust and reverence toward a space of complex, intertwining filth and beauty—or, as Choi puts it, a “dirty church” (2).

Chang’s collection, *Obit*, invokes a similar deconstruction of “high” and “low” poetry, though instead of destabilizing form through playing with meter, rhyme, and lexicons, it uses multiple disparate forms throughout the collection to challenge notions of prestige. The majority of the poems in *Obit* follow an obituary form, which is typically not considered poetry at all. Compared to the “high” form of the elegy, obituaries are written in prose with tight margins reminiscent of newspaper formatting rather than poetic verse. In terms of content and prestige, the obituary is a form often associated with the everydayness of the newspaper and detached, pragmatic reportage. However, obituaries actually serve a variety of literary purposes. They “can be an engaging newspaper accompaniment” and compared to a “news story’s concentration on death,” the obituary creates an “emphasis on life” through detailing the deceased person’s characteristics, achievements, and peculiarities (Starck 6–7). The obituary, especially when used in the context of poetry, breaks down distinctions between “high” and “low” art, not only through its constant tension between “[o]rnat[e] expression” and biographical information, but through concurrently exploring life and death, spectacle and austerity, and the newspaper as both an icon of banal everydayness and titillating newsworthiness (32).

Despite the collection’s focus on exploring the obituary, tanka poems are interspersed erratically through the volume. Unlike obituaries, tanka poems have “a long history in Japan” as a prestigious poetic form known for “emotion” and “wordplay” and hold a defining position in the Japanese literary canon (Ishikawa 32–35). However, in a similar fashion to obituaries, tanka poems are “familiar to men and women of all ages” as “[a]ll the major newspapers in Japan print reader-submitted poetry in tanka columns,” while still maintaining an elevated status as a “high” form (Ishikawa 32–33). While the tanka form may initially appear as a more prestigious form when compared to obituaries, tanka poems are also widely-disseminated, popular, and easy to understand. On the other hand, obituaries have been recognized as deeply valuable “instrument[s] of historical record” and an art form capable of “conveying personal bereavement,” despite their commonness (Starck 16, 46). The seemingly-random interweaving of tanka and obituary forms reveals both the banality and the artistic capabilities of both forms. The combination of these two forms in *Obit* fully destabilizes “high” and “low” forms through creating a formal atmosphere in which every act of linguistic creation, ranging from elevated, traditional poetry to newspaper columns, is an aesthetic, artistic, and deeply personal act of exploring oneself.

3. GEOGRAPHY: COLLAPSING THE EAST-WEST DIVIDE

In the context of diasporic identity and form, Chang draws from both Asian and European aesthetics and poetics in order to shape a new, distinctly-Asian-American style. The most obvious example of this is Chang’s weaving of Japanese tanka poems throughout *Obit*, which reveals the collection’s deeply “hybrid” nature—in a sense, the eclectic and diverse poetic forms of *Obit* symbolize the dual identity of “Asian American.” This exemplifies Wallinger-Schorn’s concept of “formal hybridity,” which indicates

how Asian American poetic forms “destabilize genre definitions and dogmas and contribute to the ever shifting possibilities of cultural hybridity” (182). Obit hybridizes two disparate forms (obituary and tanka, associated with the “West” and the “East,” respectively) to explore the universal human phenomenon of grief and thereby challenges the distinction between “Eastern” and “Western” forms. Wallinger-Schorn also observes “a formal revival in contemporary American poetry” despite a conventional understanding of 21st-century poetry’s focus on “a postmodern deconstruction of formal stability” (180). Even though 21st-century poetry is perhaps best known for free verse and the dissolution of formal restrictions (such as meter, rhyme, and structure), contemporary Asian American poets often utilize various traditional forms from both within and beyond the English-language tradition (such as Choi’s sonnets and Chang’s tankas). This simultaneous return to form and deconstruction of form relates to identity, as poets explore the omnipresent tension between taking pride in one’s cultural and racial identity while also destabilizing the very basis of race itself. In “Home,” the mother’s imagined speech pulls at this tension:

.....When
 a white writer has a character call
 another a squinty-eyed cunt, I search
 for my mother. I call her name but I
 can’t remember her voice. I think it is
 squinty. She would have said, Don’t
 listen to lao mei, we all end up in the
 same place. But where is that place?
 (“Home” 11 –18)

Here, “lao mei” sows difference between Chinese Americans and non-Chinese Americans, while “we all end up in the / same place” expresses a humanistic universality that transcends such differences (16 –18). For Asian American poets, “formal hybridity” has become a necessary mode of expressing both the beauty of a culturally-mixed identity and the impossibility of being fully “Asian” or fully “American.”

In addition to hybridizing form, Chang uses an Asian philosophical and artistic tradition to inform her work. One of the most frequently-cited Eastern ideas, which can vaguely be described as “emptiness” or the void, is “difficult...to understand vis-à-vis binary...constructs like being/nonbeing” (Stalling 9). An Asian ontological reframing of “nothingness” as a central part of both art and human existence especially appears in Chang’s tanka, “To love anyone:”

To love anyone
 means to admit extinction.
 I tell myself this
 so I never fall in love,
 so that the fire lights just me. (“To love
 anyone” 1 –5).

The acknowledgement that “to love anyone / means to admit extinction” particularly stands out, as the word “extinction” implies not only death, but nonexistence, or the utter erasure of something from the face of the planet (6 –7). The following lines—“I tell myself this / so I never fall in love”—seem to indicate a rejection of “nothingness” along the lines of Stalling’s identification of “the fear of ‘nothing’ in the Western psyche” (“I can’t say with faith” 8 –9, Stalling 11). However, the penultimate poem of the collection, also a tanka, transcends this fear:

I am ready to
 admit I love my children.
 To admit this is
 to admit that they will die.
 Die: nobody knows this but words. (“I
 am ready to” 1–5).

As the speaker proclaims, “I am ready to / admit I love my children,” they come to accept that the nothingness of death allows them to finally “love” others rather than live in fear. This radical shift appears in large part due to “cultural hybridity,” or the balancing of Asian and American cultural thought in order to construct a new identity—one that is capable of loving fearlessly. In Chang’s tankas, freedom from the specter of death and grief that permeates

through the Asian American community can only be found through destabilizing the boundaries between Asia, Europe, and America and the building of a new formal and poetic language.

4. LANGUAGE: ENGLISH- LANGUAGE HEGEMONY AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

Moving beyond form and content, Asian American poets also find themselves embroiled in reinventing language itself as they navigate the complexities of deconstructing English-language hegemony. As all of Choi and Chang's poems are written primarily in English; these texts reflect the dominance of the English language over Asian languages in both American vernacular language and American literature. Yet, Asian American poets find ways of resisting this dominance while writing in a colonial, hegemonic language. According to Zhou, "there is...no 'home' to dwell in in English. Rather than seeking refuge in English, Asian American poets reinvent new ways of saying and hearing in that language," and this question of a linguistic "home" appears in Chang's poem of the same name, "Home" (2). For instance, the use of the Mandarin word "lao mei" in the mother's imagined dialogue redefines "home" through redefining English (17). The word blurs the distinction between native and foreigner, as it is a Mandarin word written in English Romanization and situates the speaker outside of the category of "American." Thus, "lao mei" becomes, in a sense, a word written not in English nor in Mandarin but in a new language, one in which the very line between languages is ambiguated. This constructs the diasporic "home:" a space that resists both the call for assimilation into English and a return to the distant homeland of Mandarin, creating a distinctly Asian American language that is capable of expressing the complexities of a hybrid existence. Per Zhou's observation that "Asian American poets reinvent new ways of saying," Chang's poetry interests itself not only

in resisting English-language hegemony but in building a linguistic home that imagines a space in which diasporic people are not constrained to a particular ethno-national-linguistic identity but exist comfortably in between these binary divisions.

Choi's work also engages in reinventing language, albeit in a strikingly different fashion. Though "Chatroulette" does not integrate non-English words, it engages in what Leong calls the "surreal mode"—particularly, the "surrealist act of face transplantation" (33). Leong notes how "it is assumed that Asian American poets—by default—write with white faces," yet they often subvert such presumptions through "a making of performative faces" (33). The "face" as a false performance appears in Choi's "Chatroulette:"

[I am a] live action hologram projected
on
their basement brains. My foul
amygdala
Prince Thirstings, desperate
congregations, pink
or blue-brown mammals begging for my
face. ("Chatroulette" 9–12)

The description of "blue-brown mammals begging for my face" parallels Leong's surreal "face transplantation," as the poem relates how, in this online chatroom, the "face" (as a representation of identity) is always shifting, always desired, yet never more than a "live action hologram." The performativity of faces also appears in a later moment:

I'll make you liquid men. I'll watch you
eat
my image, icon, rumor of a god
who wants you back. Who wants to
watch you dance
your crooked dance, your sad attempts
at flight. ("Chatroulette" 23-26)

Here, the use of the word "who" (rather than "what") implies a personalization of the speaker's "icon," suggesting that they have constructed an alternate self (or a "performative face") to cater to the "mammals begging for my

face.” For Asian American poets, abstracting the self through surrealism and “impersonation” mirrors the blurring of the boundaries of English as a self-contained entity (Leong 34). Much as Chang performs multiple “faces” through linguistic surrealism, Choi finds the surreal within the literal face itself, examining the ways in which the anonymous chatroom user can become someone who they are not. In doing so, Choi blurs the lines not only between different languages and cultures, but between language and the “face,” with the face representing both the body and the self.

5. THE BODY: INHABITATION AND DIS-INHABITATION

The body is among the most prevalent spaces of indeterminacy in Choi and Chang’s work, as they explore with particular interest the simultaneous inhabitation and dis-inhabitation of the Asian American body. The body here represents not only one’s physical flesh but also the self (or the body’s idea of itself). For example, in Choi’s essay on language and poetics, “Imitation Games,” she utilizes the concept of “racial dissociation.” This term is defined as the construction of “a ‘false self’ that is compliant, competent, and acceptable” in order to adhere to “a social contract of Asian American model minority citizenship” (“Imitation Games”). Choi recalls being mistaken for a part of a museum exhibit as an example of forced disembodiment of the Asian American body, essentially redefining her body as an object through refracting it as an art piece:

I’m in an art museum in Dallas, sitting alone on a bench to listen to a sound installation... Suddenly, the door swings open, interrupting my focus, and a couple walks in. Like most of the museum’s guests, they’re white, middle-aged.

“Oh my god!” exclaims the man, pointing at me. “I thought she was real!”

Angry at the disruption, I turn my head

to scowl at him.

“Oh!” he says. “She is real!” He laughs and turns to the woman. “I thought she was part of the exhibit,” he says to her. (“Imitation Games”)

In “Chatroulette,” however, dissociation through the construction of a disembodied image occurs through the screen, as in the lines, “My body is its image, here. My image, / just an always dying thing” (30 –31). The phrase “is its image” demonstrates grammatically the destruction of subjective embodiment, since “My body” is redefined quite clearly as only “its image.” The subsequent “here” also implies embodiment (as “here” is where the body is, and “there” is where the body is not), suggesting that the speaker has entered a paradoxical space in which they are separate from the body through its stratification as an “image” of itself but also inhabiting it as a subjective “here.” This is precisely what “racial dissociation” refers to—the “false” and “compliant” persona is also embodied, tied inherently to racialized, objectified flesh.

In Chang’s “Home,” the racialized aspect of this dissociation is even clearer, as the speaker recalls a moment “When / a white writer has a character call / another a squinty-eyed cunt” (11 –13). The white writer’s attempt to capture racial violence again merely transforms the Asian body into an “image,” brought to life through invoking the corporeal (“squinty-eyed”). The speaker’s subsequent recollection of their mother’s voice (“I think it is / squinty”) demonstrates how the white writer’s “image” of the Asian body has penetrated the speaker’s memory of their own mother (15 –16). Here, the “racial dissociation” occurs directly at the site of the white writer’s appropriation of racialized violence, even though the “false self” is the self which is racialized in a bodily manner (as in the phrase “squinty-eyed”). For the speaker, liberation occurs in destabilizing the body through re-inhabiting the mother’s body. This occurs in a final epiphany that concludes the poem:

.....I lie down
 next to her stone, close my eyes. I know
 many things now. Even with my eyes
 closed, I know a bird passes over me. In
 hangman, the body forms while it is
 being hung. As in, we grow as we are
 dying. ("Home" 23 -29)

In the line "I lie down next / to her stone, close my eyes," the speaker lies above the mother's grave with her eyes closed, paralleling the position of a body in a casket (23 -24). The tension here lies in the simultaneous closeness between the bodies created by the speaker's imitation of the mother's bodily position beneath the earth and the distance that they have between the realms of above ground and below ground, death and life, parent and child. The ability for the daughter to symbolically re-inhabit the mother's body while maintaining distance represents her newfound ability to embody her past and her heritage while still existing as her own, unique, living self. It is this realization that allows for the sudden epiphany: "I know / many things now" (24 -25). In a dramatic rejection of the image created by the white writer, the speaker returns to the physicality of the body (even, in this case, the buried body) in order to rewrite the Asian American body not merely as a site of dissociation, but as a shared body between the self and the mother.

6. THE ARCHIVE: HISTORY AS EMBODIED PRESENT

Exploring the body also delves into questions concerning embodied histories through the construction of an "archive." Chang's use of the obituary form in particular, which represents a "valid instrument of historical record" capable of gaining "insight...of what it was like to be a citizen of a particular community at a particular time," becomes a way both of making history through documentation and reliving history through writing (Starck 46). This becomes

apparent towards the beginning of Chang's "Home:"

Now home is a looking glass called Rose Hills Memorial Park. How far she has travelled from Beijing to Taiwan to New York to Pennsylvania to Michigan to California to Rose Hills. ("Home" 8 -11)

This passage directly relates to the quality of a "brief biographical sketch" that many obituaries possess rather than constituting a mere death notice (Starck 10). To this end, the obituary is both a way of reifying the past (for example, the mother's migration) as the present while also historicizing and preserving the present (the death of the person) as the (soon-to-be) past.

This confounding of past and present through the archive mirrors a trend in Asian American poetry that Leong calls "the documental mode," which roughly describes "poems that incorporate prior records" such as "found text" or "images" (36 -7). One of the poems in Choi's *Soft Science*, "The Cyborg Wants to Make Sure She Heard You Right," demonstrates this idea precisely. The poem is preceded by a brief preface: "Composed of tweets directed at the author, processed through Google Translate into multiple languages, then back into English." Choi's use of the documental mode builds an archive in which the hatred of the past cannot be obscured even through altering the found text technologically and linguistically. The intention of the tweet composing the very first line—"Mrs. Great Anime Pornography, the fruit of the fields"—is relatively clear despite the methodical augmentation that the author used on the text ("The Cyborg Wants to Make Sure She Heard You Right" 1). While Choi uses found text in a literal sense, Chang's "Home" plays off of this idea in a new, inventive way, using an archival form but writing her own content. For Chang, the "found text" is not a physical artifact but a psychic one, as revealed in this moment: "I / can't remember her voice...She would have said" (14 -16). Since the obituary form of the poem marks it as a documental space, the content becomes imbued

with historic significance, even though the phrase “She would have said” implies that the information is imagined rather than concrete. Thus, *Obit* rewrites the archive as a collection of possibilities, imaginaries, and internal desires rather than a representation of the past. In “Home,” history as past, present, or future is destabilized, but even beyond that, the poem pulls at the tension between history as objective documentation and history as internal, psychological, and lived reality.

7. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Asian American poetry’s interest in the dissolution of binary divisions seems at first to fit neatly into a general shift towards postmodern deconstruction. Yet this phenomenon carries particular weight in Asian American poetry specifically since it is inextricably tied to diasporic identity. Deconstruction exists not only as an abstract philosophical concept but as a directly-inhabited experience of defying categorization. Diaspora is by definition a transgression; it is a cosmic shattering of the elusive promise of neatly dividing humanity into discrete, easily-identifiable groups. For Asian American poets, deconstruction functions as a necessary building block for survival. Perhaps this is why so many of the binaries identified in this paper in some way relate back to the idea of “home” as Asian Americans construct a new home in poetry and language, a home that allows for all the beauty of complexity and contradiction to flourish. Asian American poets actively resist the forced dis-inhabitation of bodies, histories, and languages that racism produces through rewriting and redefining these terms—thus, in a sense, re-making language itself.

Despite the vast thematic and formal differences among “Home,” “Chatroulette,” and Chang’s tanka poems, all of these works grapple with the necessity of dissolving binaries. Their poetry asserts that the methodology of achieving this ultimately lies in acceptance. In a final epiphany in “Home,” the line “we grow as we are / dying” appears, paralleling Choi’s exploration of “My

image, / an always dying thing” and even the lines of the final tanka of *Obit*: “To admit this is / to admit that they will die” (“Home” 28 -9, “Chatroulette” 30 -1, “I am ready to” 3 -4). For both Choi and Chang, life comes into focus only when one accepts that death and life are not irreconcilable opposites but mutually constitutive, amorphous entities—to live is to die, and to die is to live. Just the same, Asian Americans are neither Asian nor American, yet both Asian and American. In *Obit* and *Soft Science*, the acceptance of this contradiction lays the foundation for a new Asian American language by rewriting the eternal tensions of indeterminacy and ambiguity as “home.”

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