VIOLENCE, LANGUAGE, AND EMBODIMENT: REIMAGINING IDENTITY THROUGH WRITING IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ASIAN AMERICAN POETRY

by

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This project analyzes the poetry of Mai Der Vang, Ocean Vuong, Franny Choi and Victoria Chang within the larger context of Asian American literature. My research question is, "How do representations of language, violence and embodiment in twenty-first century Asian American poetry influence the formation of identity?" In order to answer this question, I utilize close-reading of primary texts, social and historical context, literary criticism, and cultural studies to understand how these poets respond and contribute to a tradition of Asian American poetry. Through a close reading of Vuong's "Notebook Fragments" and "The Gift" from his collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* as well as Vang's "Mother of People without Script" and "Your Mountain Lies Down with You" from her collection *Afterland*, I argue that their poetry is deeply concerned not only with what is destroyed in war and displacement, but also what is created. Then, in analyzing Choi's "Chatroulette" from her collection *Soft Science* and Chang's "Home" from her collection *Obit*, among other poems from these collections, I argue that these poets use the dissolution of binary opposites (e.g. "Eastern" v. "Western) in order to construct a "home" within language. I identify three crucial aspects of Asian American identity—language, violence, and embodiment—that are ambiguated but also are reborn and reimagined in these poems. As such, these poems assert the importance of Asian American identity as a new creation of the self, despite the histories of violence that, in many ways, necessitated its creation. Thus, these 21st

century works suggest a development within the Asian American literary tradition towards a representation of the Asian American diaspora as a creation of a new culture, rather than a loss of a traditional culture.

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Introduction

What is Asian American poetry? Perhaps the simplest explanation would be: the body of work encompassing all poets self-identified as Asian American. Even in this simplified conception, the central issue of the tradition is clear—identity. More so than the author's background, what seems to define Asian American poetry is the way it grapples with, challenges, or affirms a sense of identity, a sense of belonging through language. As a diasporic community, Asian Americans have never quite fit into black-and-white identitarian discourses, always too "American" to be Asian and too "Asian" to be American. Thus Asian American poetry generally seeks to construct a space in which the arbitrarily dichotomized categories of "Asian" and "American" can coexist. Asian American poets have represented identity in a variety of ways, including affirming the beauty of Asian culture in an American context, rhetorically countering racist and xenophobic ideology, and deconstructing the very nature of race, ethnicity, nationality, and gender themselves. Such approaches poetically represent "cultural hybridity," which "deconstructs the eurocentric hierarchy implicit in American society," originating in the "interstitial passage between the fixed identifications of majority America, Asian American, and Asia" (Wallinger-Schorn 7). Asian American poets are "not interested in the boundaries marking different, fixed identities, but in the liminal spaces between these separated units" (7). Cultural hybridity is important to Asian American identity as it affirms the possibilities for diasporic identity to exceed the bounds of racist, nationalist thinking.

Yet equally important to acknowledge is the inciting factor of cultural hybridity, which I understand to be violence. Whether poems recount fleeing wars, losing loved ones, or experiencing racism in the US, violence is deeply embedded in their representations of identity. Though violence obviously generates destruction, I find that it also leads to the creation of

something new. Violence first produces trauma through loss of life, hardship, displacement, and alienation. During this process, a "blurring" occurs, in which different aspects of identity (such as language and embodiment), or supposedly diametrically opposed identities (such as "Asian" and "American"), become indistinguishable from each other. Finally, though, the poems tend to move towards a conclusion focusing on creation rather than destruction, in which something beautiful, often a connection to people, self, or land, is born out of the ashes of violence. I argue that the very category of "Asian American" is one built from violence as Asian migrants fled and continue to flee their homelands in search of safety, as well as facing racialized violence in the US. In tracing this diasporic movement, Asian Americans are challenged with the complex interweaving of identity as they navigate becoming both American and Asian. Yet in the end, this process creates the unique identity of "Asian American," which, in the poems I discuss here, is a source of beauty, not just a manifestation of historical trauma.

In this paper, I center the movement from violence to hybridization to the creation of new identities in twenty-first century Asian American poetry. First, I analyze how Asian American poetry has developed as a cultural tradition from the start of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. This demonstrates how identity has been historically represented in Asian American poetry, and how the twenty-first century idea of the movement from violence to hybridity to creation represents a shift in the tradition. Second, I introduce the current body of scholarly work on identity in Asian American poetry, identifying three common themes: violence, language, and embodiment, which I find to be of importance to the process of "blurring" or hybridization in twenty-first century Asian American poetry. Then, I analyze the work of Ocean Vuong and Mai der Vang, looking into how they represent violence as both a destruction and recreation of identity. Following this, I perform a close analysis of works by

Franny Choi and Victoria Chang, examining how their disruption of binary divisions of aspects of identity assumed to be antagonistic opposites (e.g. “English” v. “non-English,” “West” v. “East,” etc.) constructs a home within language. Finally, I argue that the relationship between violence and the creation of identity is a particularly relevant theme in twenty-first century Asian American poetry, which both pays tribute to and reimagines histories of violence in Asian American poetry since its foundation over 100 years ago.

1. Asian American Literary History

In this section, I generalize the Asian American literary tradition into a series of four major historical periods to illustrate the vast transformations in Asian American poetry and scholarship since 1900. Since its beginnings around the turn of the twentieth century, Asian American poetry, and Asian American literature more generally, has reflected the unique oppressions that Asians face in the United States. Asian American poets have likewise engaged in resistive work, challenging the notion of a hegemonic, white American identity and seeking to find a sense of home-away-from-home in a foreign land, or in a land which renders them foreign regardless of their actual nationality. The four major periods I identify in Asian American literary history are: inception, early canonization, "ethnic" literature, and diversification. Importantly, these movements are neither discrete nor separable—each issue bleeds into the next, and all of them remain central to the concerns of modern poets.

1.1. Inception of the Movement

What I call the "inception" of modern Asian American poetry begins around 1900-1910 with mass immigration from Asia to the United States, and lasts more or less until the 1970s. Several strains of literature arose during this period, including poetry of detained Asian Americans, poetry of free Asian Americans, and the rising influence of Asian culture on non-Asian American poets. The poems of this period reflect contemporaneous violence targeting Asian Americans, such as detention at immigration stations and Japanese internment, and demonstrate some of the first representations of a connection between violence and creation in Asian American poetry.

First, the poems produced at Angel Island Immigration Station and during Japanese internment constitute much of what would be called "Asian American poetry" before 1950.

Josephine Park notes how these "twinned crises" produced poetry that "marked out confinement," expressed a "physically felt sorrow," and reflected the poets' "barely livable conditions" (101-103). Take, for instance, the closing lines of Poem 135, translated into English from the Chinese originally carved into the walls:

> From now on, I am departing far from this building
> All of my fellow villagers are rejoicing with me.
> Don't say that everything within is Western styled.
> Even if it is built of jade, it has turned into a cage. ("Poems and Inscriptions," Poem 135, ll. 5-8)

The juxtaposition of "jade" and "cage" demonstrates not only the suffering and entrapment of the poet's location, but a loss of hope. That which the speaker saw as jade (representing beauty and promise) has become a cage (a representation of physical confinement and loss of freedom). The line, "All of my fellow villagers are rejoicing with me" expresses the need for community and the reality of social depravation within the facilities. The phrase "fellow villagers" demonstrates a burgeoning Asian American identity through a feeling of collective suffering and eventual collective joy. The "fellow villagers" represent more than just people from the same country as the speaker—through the shared experience of violence, they become not merely Chinese, but Chinese American. Even in its more hopeful moments, however, the poem never forgets nor diminishes the harshness of the conditions of the immigration station.

These sentiments are echoed with eerie likeness in the poetry of Japanese Internment, in an "almost too-elegant pairing of Angel Island and interment poetry" (Park 104). Yoshiko Uchida's translations of her mother's poetry reveal the feelings of confinement and pain so familiar to the American immigrants at Angel Island:

Banished to this
Desert land,
I cherish the
Blessing of the sky.
…..
Grown old so soon
In a foreign land,
What do they think,
These people
Eating in lonely silence? (Uchida p. 122, ll. 7-10, 15-19)

The poet, a survivor of the Topaz War Relocation Center in Utah, recounts the natural and spiritual desolation that she experienced. The words "banished" and "foreign" create a strong sense of displacement, and of being away from home. Yet these words take on meaning at multiple levels, painting America as a foreign land, but also Topaz specifically as a land foreign even within America, where it is located. The construction of the internment camp as a foreign space within a foreign space compounds the speaker's feelings of loss and loneliness.

Though these two moments in American history clearly and distinctly shaped the legacy of Asian American poetry and identity, it wasn't until decades after they were written that most of these poems were published. The poems at Angel Island were not rediscovered until the 1970s, and Japanese internment poetry was not published "because those incarcerated were thought to have deemed it better to forget" (Park 103). Though their impacts on American poetry have since been acknowledged, these formative poems long existed in darkness, brought to attention only after Asian American studies had already begun to emerge as an academic field of study.

Yet free American poets, contemporaneous with the two tragedies, also produced and published poetry, often in direct conversation with their Asian and American identities. The Philippine-born American poet Carlos Bulosan expressed the strength of his American identity in his famous poem, "I Want the Wide American Earth:"

> We are everywhere, we are everywhere.
> We are there when they sentence us to prison for telling the truth;
> We are there when they conscript us to fight their wars;
> We are there when they throw us in concentration camps;
> We are there when they come at dawn with their guns. (30-34)

The anaphora of "we are" and "we are everywhere" gives the poem a didactic and oratory quality. The emphasis created through this repetition signals a radical claiming of "here" and "everywhere" as spaces of Asian American inhabitation. This particular passage, with its examples of "prison," "wars," "concentration camps" and "guns," certainly expresses a feeling of oppression and violence not dissimilar to the poetry of imprisoned Asian Americans. However, rather than concluding with loneliness, destitution, and foreignness, Bulosan instead argues that despite these feelings, Asian Americans have found a home in America, and no amount of violence can erase Asian American identity.

Not long after the rise in mass immigration from Asia to the United States, the influence of Asian art, poetry, and general aesthetics started to appear in poetry written by non-Asian Americans. Steven Yao argues that "the very establishment of a distinctively modern poetic idiom in English" in the twentieth century relies upon "a sustained engagement by some of the most renowned writers of the period with particular Asian cultural forms," most famously the haiku, among many others (132). In particular, Ezra Pound's famous collection *Cathay* "maps how the categories of 'Asian,' and in particular 'Chinese,' intersect with the category of 'poetry' within the dominant U.S. cultural imaginary," which, according to Yao, makes it an "important

touchstone" in the history of Asian American articulations of "ethnic and cultural identity," despite the fact that Pound was not Asian (136, 152). In other words, the early twentieth century marked the inception of the Asian American poetic tradition not only due to the influx of Asian writers in the US, but also the growing influence of Asian culture on the wider American consciousness. Expressions of a hybridity of Asian and American cultures, peoples, and identities appeared in the writings of both Asian and non-Asian American poets, sparking a tradition that has continued to question the nature of identity to this day.

Though several other Asian American poets with popular profiles wrote during this period (such as Sadakichi Hartmann, Yone Noguchi, H.T. Tsiang, and Sui Sin Far), the few poems mentioned in this section exemplify how Asian American poetry has contended with violence, identity, and cultural hybridity since its beginnings. The fact that poetry was not only created but has survived Japanese interment and Angel Island Immigration Station is in itself a testament to Asian American poetry's ability to create something new out of violence. In addition, the content of the poems expresses the connection between violence, identity, and home. Phrases such as "Western-styled" and "foreign land" create a sense of physical and cultural foreignness in the US. However, there is at the same time a burgeoning feeling of community or home in the connection the speaker feels to their "fellow villagers" or "people / Eating in lonely silence." Bulosan's claiming of "there" and "everywhere" as spaces of Asian American inhabitation also creates a sense of home amidst a vast array of violence. As this relationship between violence, identity, and home began to appear in Asian American poetry, cultural hybridity began to surface even in the works of non-Asian poets such as Pound, which laid the groundwork for questioning the extent to which "Asian" and "American" could be considered to be wholly different identities.

1.2. Early Canonization

Little has been written on the development of the tradition between the 1950s and 1970s, and it is reasonable to assume that the body of literature, even among what little did exist, was not widely studied, published, or disseminated. In fact, it wasn't until 1970 that a park ranger noticed the Chinese writing on the walls of Angel Island Immigration Station, 30 years after its closure (Park 102). Japanese Internment poetry followed a similar trajectory, only reaching a wide audience, and often in translation, decades after being composed. Though scholars now acknowledge the importance of these bodies of work as the very beginnings of Asian American poetry, they only entered the discussion due to a new era, which I call "early canonization." With rising awareness of minority and ethnic studies proliferating in the US scholarly conversation, Asian American literature emerged as a formal field of research and inquiry, which dramatically shaped the tradition.

Perhaps no publication was more important for the advancement of Asian American studies than *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers.* Originally published in 1974, the anthology is considered by many to be one of the major impetuses driving the nascent field of Asian American literary studies. In her introduction to the 3rd edition, Fickle writes that *Aiiieeeee!* "continues to be relevant, and not simply because it remains Asian American studies' controversial origin story" ("Foreword" xx). In the introduction to the 1974 edition, the four editors make clear the goals of the anthology: to represent the fact "that Asian American writers have been writing seriously since the nineteenth century, and writing well" ("Introduction" 3). This exists in opposition to "the destruction of an organic sense of identity, [and] the complete psychological and cultural subjugation of the Asian American," which they call "white racism's only success" (10). Clearly, the central issues for this anthology were with canonization in a

scholarly, academic, or even popular context. That Asian American writers had been "writing seriously since the nineteenth century, and writing well" suggests that the virtual nonexistence of Asian American literary studies at that point could be traced not to a lack of talent or material, but an intentional elision. The direct calls to "white racism" and white supremacy indicate that the editors sought not only to highlight Asian voices, but to dismantle a system of oppression.

Fickle argues that the book "is a part of a broader politicization of Asian Americans…to establish ethnic studies programs" in Californian universities ("Foreward" xix). Published by the historically black Howard University Press after a series of rejections, *Aiiieeeee!* was released in the heyday of the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the Vietnam War (xix). *Aiiieeeee!*'s legacy exists as one of the forces driving the burgeoning field of Asian American studies, paralleling similar movements in black, indigenous, Latinx, gender, and sexuality studies. Following *Aiiieeeee!,* several notable anthologies of Asian American literature, including many that include poetry, such as *The Open Boat: Poems From Asian America* (1993) and *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* (2002) have been published, among others.

1.3. "Ethnic" Literature

Though the inclusion of Asian American literature in a widening field of ethnic studies pushed previously understudied texts towards the forefront of the American literary canon, the era following was marked by ambivalences concerning the validity of the category of "ethnic" literature more fundamentally. Though I generalize that this era began during or just following that of the early canonization in the 1980s and 1990s, it more or less appeared concurrently with the field of Asian American studies, and will likely persist as long as the field remains. This era is defined by a central question in scholarship—is separating American literature into ethnic

traditions useful, beneficial, or even possible? Alongside this question, Asian American poetry seemed to diverge around this time towards two different modes of representing identity—one "mainstream" and one "experimental."

By labelling Asian American literature as "ethnic," cultural and literary theorists have been concerned about how this category reproduces a mostly socially-constructed difference. Shirley Lim identifies a key question behind the making of an exclusively Asian American literary canon: "…how is it possible to identify the sources of Asian-American literary effects without falling into the trap of identifying Asian-Americans as 'special' or 'different' and so unwittingly confirming racist commonplaces?" (51). It is certainly true that the category of Asian American literature implies a distinction between Asian American works and "general" American literature which takes the demonym "American" without any other qualifiers. Separating the American canon along the lines of race or ethnicity could seem problematic, as it suggests that there exists a fundamental difference between races, and reifies white American literature as "standard," and everything else as "ethnic." Yet Lim argues that Asian American literature diverges from other American canons not simply due to the writers' ethnicities, but the content of the writing itself. In particular, "the non-European character underlying their diverse styles, themes and forms" and "the incorporation of phrases or whole lines of the original language into the English text" can be used to distinguish Asian American literature (52, 54). Thus the difference is primarily cultural, rather than racial—Asian American writers have incorporated Western, Eastern, and American influences to create a tradition which is distinct from both Asian literature and American literature more broadly.

Though this debate largely exists in scholarship, its effects can also be felt in the shifts in the poetry itself. Timothy Yu posits developments in Asian American poetry against those of Language poetry, arguing:

> While reading Asian American poetry exposes some of the strains and limits in the political Language poetry, particularly around the issues of race and identity, Language poetry's critique of mainstream poetry may also map the limits of the Asian American poetic project, insofar as it relies upon a commodifiable "ethnic" individuality. (Yu 424)

In essence, Yu examines how the debate of the validity of "ethnic" studies appears in diverging traditions of American poetry. Asian American poetry "exposed the mainstream voice as a white voice" through calling upon distinctly non-white, non-Western cultural references (Yu 425). Yet at the same time, Language poetry sought to break down the very nature of identity itself through language, in opposition to Asian American "mainstream" poetry which uses language to reproduce identity. Thus Asian American poetry became divided into two strains. The first, "mainstream" or "ethnic" poetry, uses traditional signifiers of culture such as food, art, language, and religion to convey a distinctly Asian identity. Poetry of this style could potentially be described as "sentimental," perhaps even venturing into the lyric realm, compared to the second strain of "experimental" or "Language" poetry. The latter style breaks down poetic convention as well as ethnic stereotypes in order to challenge identity. These poems are often not obviously "Asian" (that is, there are no clear references to Asian culture) and when they are, they seek more so to dismantle any concrete sense of identity.

Consider two of the poets that Yu investigates, Li-Young Lee and John Yau. Lee represents the "mainstream" tradition, calling upon traditional culture (such as art and language)

and exalting its beauty. In one of his most canonized works, “Persimmons,” Lee uses the fruit, which has been cultivated in Asia for millennia, to tell the story of the speaker’s family:

> 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. (Lee 70-76)

The “scrolls” and “paintings” depicting “hibiscus leaf” and “persimmons” imbue the poem with a deep sense of reverence towards the beauty of Asian art and culture. The invocation of the fruit as a symbol of this tradition is used to express a mix of grief and consolation at the father’s loss of sight, as he, presumably, approaches the end of his life:

> 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 85-89)

The connection between food and art, which appears in the father’s painting of persimmons, and how these ideas both relate to memory, constructs the poem’s main argument. Though apart from their homeland, the family finds comfort in all the “things that never leave a person,” that is, all the things they carried with them from Asia to America. Thus the use of cultural artifacts throughout the poem seeks not to reproduce stereotypes, but express a consolation. Though the father is blind and can no longer see his own paintings, he cannot forget “the texture of persimmons, / in your palm, the ripe weight,” symbolizing how diasporic people can lose their

homeland, but can never truly forget their own culture, which, for the speaker, seems to be a thing of beauty.

By contrast, John Yau's poetry is imbued with ambivalence, breaking down any coherent sense of identity. In his poem, "ING GRISH," the speaker employs a sort of anaphora of direct contradiction, saying "I do not know Chinese" and "I do know Chinese" several times, as well as "I do not know English" and "I do know English" (Yau 15, 22, 24, 28). Though the poem deals with similar themes of parenthood and language as "Persimmons," the contradictory nature inherent in the speaker's relationship with English and Chinese concludes in a much less consolatory fashion:

> I do not know English because when my father said he would like
> to see me dead, I was never quite sure what he meant
>
> I do not know Chinese because I never slept with a woman whose
> vagina slanted like my mother's eyes
>
> I do not know English or Chinese and, because of that, I did
> not put a gravestone at the head of my parents' graves as I felt no
> language mirrored in the ones they spoke (98-104)

One obvious difference between this poem and Lee's work is that "ING GRISH" feels decidedly less sentimental, flowery, and "beautiful" in a conventional sense. Beyond that, however, the poem's movements are much more deconstructive. Where "Persimmons" finds consolation in the acceptance and preservation of Asian culture, "ING GRISH" finds the speaker lost in translation between two languages that they simultaneously know and do not know. Embedded in this linguistic conundrum is a breaking down of the boundaries between English and Chinese, and other languages. The very first line, "I never learned Singlish," references a Singaporean variety

of English, which is only partially mutually intelligible with General American or British English (Yau 1). Whether Singlish is a variety of English or an entirely different language is impossible to say with certainty. Though "Persimmons" does deal with the struggles of English second-language acquisition, it doesn't make the same deconstructive moves as "ING GRISH." For Yau, the very category of "English" is itself unstable, and the ability for anyone to "know" even their native or heritage language is constantly in flux. The concluding stanza in which the speaker asserts "I do not know English or Chinese" and thus "I did not put a gravestone at the head of my parents' graves" ends not with the consolation found in reclaiming Asian identity (as "Persimmons" does), but rather, it allows the state of lacking, of knowing neither language, to exist on its own, without resolution. While both poets grapple with identity, the more "mainstream" side finds solace in an "Asian-ness" whereas the "experimental" side expresses the impossibility for Asian Americans to exist within any linguistic or cultural category. As George Uba puts it, for ethnic poets, "although in different ways, conceiving identity is only possible by foregrounding its partialities…for Yau every version of identity is radically contestable because of the unstable nature of the tools used to conceptualize it" (35-36).

1.4. Diversification

Out of the debate concerning whether or not Asian American literature represents a useful division of literary traditions came a more fundamental question: what does "Asian American" mean? Who is included, and who is not? In recent years, the conversation has shifted towards diversity within the Asian American tradition, rather than thinking of "Asian" as a homogenous racial identity vis-à-vis categories of White and Black. In this way, Asian American literature is being examined with an intersectional lens, as more and more diverse voices enter the existing canon.

Even *Aiiieeeee!,* back in 1972, acknowledged the diversity inherent in Asian American literature: "Asian Americans are not one people but several" ("Preface" xxv). Yet, as many have criticized, they go on to mention only "Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Filipino Americans" (xxv). The entire anthology includes only writers of these three ethnic backgrounds, no poetry, and a significant majority of the authors are male. Despite its groundbreaking status, *Aiiieeeee!* has come under scrutiny for its narrow representation of different traditions within the greater umbrella of Asian American literature. In fact, the degree of criticism became so intense that "Asian Americanists have often been far more familiar with what is wrong with *Aiiieeeee!* than *Aiiieeeee!* itself" ("Foreword" x). Given the push to incorporate more diverse voices in the Asian American literary canon, I argue that we are currently entering a new era of Asian American poetry, which I call "diversification." Here, the question concerns not the diversity that "ethnic" literature adds to "general American" literature, but rather how marginalized groups *within* Asian American poetry specifically add to the diversity of its canon.

In poet Franny Choi's essay, playfully titled "(B)Aiiieeeee!: The Future Is Femme and Queer," she argues that Asian American poetry is becoming diverse along all lines of oppression—gender, sexuality, nationality, lived experience, etc. According to Choi,

> There are hundreds of us: femme, women, queer, trans, and gender nonconforming poets from all corners of the Asian diaspora, speaking dozens of languages, spanning multiple legacies of American war and occupation, from all class backgrounds and migration histories. Here's to our continuing arrival. (647)

Though much of the essay focuses on the privileging of masculine and heterosexual expressions in Asian American poetry, the passage above highlights the sheer number of intersections that the field actually encompasses. In direct conversation with *Aiiieeeee!,* this argument demonstrates a new movement in the tradition which in many ways diverges from the

historical precedent set by the original anthology. In this new era, diversity is not just an arbitrary goal, but a necessary and constitutive part of Asian American poetry. Since no single poet can capture the breadth of all Asian American experiences, in order for the tradition to convey contemporary Asian American identity, it must embrace differences rather than shoehorn diverse voices into a historical archetype of what makes poetry "Asian American."

As female and/or queer poets from various regions within Asia and America, I find that Choi, Chang, Vuong, and Vang fit into the new movement towards diversification in Asian American literature. Poems describing the harsh conditions of refugee camps in Thailand, native Hmong religious practices, cities torn apart by bombs and fire, robots and the internet age, sexuality and queerness, and the loss of parents who fled their homeland, broaden the scope of Asian American poetry beyond male, heteromasculine, second-generation Chinese and Japanese American experiences. Of course, their poems pay attention to the history of Asian American poetry and resonate with many concerns reflected in Angel Island's wall poems, *Aiiieeeee!,* and the experimental and mainstream poets of the twentieth century. However, they challenge the existing canon through representing identity in new ways by emphasizing how identity formation occurs in the spaces of indeterminacy between violence, language, and the body. This mirrors Choi's identification of the expansion of Asian American poetry to include a wider breadth of histories and lived experiences.

2. Identity in Asian American Poetry

Throughout the diverse histories and writings that constitute what we call "Asian American poetry," perhaps no theme remains as persistent as identity. Indeed, per the debate on the value of "ethnic literature" as a category (see section 1.3), exploration of Asian American identity could be said to be the single defining characteristic of all poetry labelled "Asian American." As such, the study of identity and its representations is crucial to understanding the meaning and significance of Asian American poetry as a whole. In this section, I identify three elements of Asian American poetry that influence identity formation: language, violence, and embodiment. Then, I illustrate how the existing scholarship characterizes the relationship between these elements and Asian American identity.

2.1 Language and Identity: English Language Hegemony, Violence, and the Body

Perhaps no topic has been discussed as thoroughly in the existing literature concerning Asian American identity as English language hegemony. The majority of contemporary Asian American poets write in English, which is for many their native language. Yet in doing so, they must contend with English as a hegemonic language that marginalizes Asian and other world languages. In addition, Asian American poets are keenly interested in how English proficiency is linked to humanization in the US. The relationship between English, power, and identity is deeply entrenched in nearly all Asian American poetry. In addition, the relationships between language, violence, and embodiment are so tightly intertwined that nearly all critical work on English language hegemony in Asian American literature also mentions violence and the body. In particular, I find that many scholars argue that violence (including the violence inherent in English language hegemony) maps racialization onto the body through language. In this section, I analyze how these scholars relate this idea to identity formation in Asian American literature.

In her paper "English Before Engrish: Asian American Poetry's Unruly Tongue," Tara Fickle draws upon the proliferation of "Engrish," or the translation of "Asian grammatical and semantic 'failures' into a source of national comic relief," as one of the many manifestations of the dominance exerted by Standard American English (84). According to Fickle,

> "Asian uses—or misuses—of the English language are, however, more than just a source of American entertainment: they have become instrumental sites for the contemporary articulation of a national sovereignty that is increasingly being defined as, and through, linguistic sovereignty." (85)

This "linguistic sovereignty" expressed by the mockery of "'Engrish'" not only marginalizes grammatical and syntactic differences but does so by racializing those differences, thus tying English language dominance directly to "Asian American" as a racial category (85). Thus the valorization of "standard" English and the derision directed towards "Engrish" reflect "the reification of whiteness as the socially correct native 'standard' of American national identity" (85). For Fickle, Asian Americans are excluded in this way from the "socially correct" standard of whiteness, which hinges on one's ability to speak "proper" English. Fickle essentially argues that Asian American poetry, vis-a-vis the racialization inherent in English language hegemony, responds with "language games" that disrupt the narrative of a single, correct, white-coded "English." If dominant racist ideology maps syntactical and grammatical "errors" onto the racialized Asian body, Asian American poets break down the very nature of syntax and grammar to reflect the "recombinatory yoking of two identities, Asian and American, assumed to be not just independent but antagonistic" (103).

Xiaojing Zhou makes a similar argument, analyzing how racialization is mapped onto the body through language. Zhou writes that

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

This argument acknowledges that language and race are inherently intertwined in American culture and national identity. Here, the link between language and the body becomes evident as well, as language "inscrib[es] racial meanings on the body." The Asian American body is racialized not only in its visual, corporeal form, but also in the way English language dominance writes new, racialized meanings onto it. Similar to Fickle, Zhou finds that Asian American poets possess a keen awareness of this linguistic racialization, and form identity through writing in juxtaposition to it. Zhou asserts that "there is no fixed ethnicity to reclaim, no 'home' to dwell in in English," and instead, "Asian American poets reinvent new ways of saying and hearing in that language, rendering it inflected with 'alien' sounds or 'foreign' accents" (2). Since English, the language in which most Asian American poets write, fundamentally marginalizes and racializes the Asian body, these poets can find "home" only in the creation of a "new" English that is somehow freed from hegemonic ideals of "correct" Standard English. It is in this "home" that one may find identity, and a sense of subjectivity, self, and belonging historically denied to Asian Americans. Thus the nature of language itself is a crucial aspect of identity formation in Asian American poetry.

Dorothy J. Wang notes how the relationship between language and the Asian American body has become so tightly connected that regardless of one's actual English level, the perception of a lack of English proficiency, and thereby a lack of "Americanness," and personhood, remains. According to Wang, the very idea of "'Americanness'" has been "inseparable from the belief that 'Orientals' are also constitutively nonnative speakers of

English," citing how even fourth-generation Asian Americans "are often asked if English is their native tongue" (26). Poetry has a particular interest in these issues, as it is "the genre most tied to high culture, literary tradition, formal mastery, and 'native tongue'—a literary tradition from which minority writers were largely excluded" (26). Here Wang also highlights a connection to the body, arguing that "since the racialized poet…is often apprehended in terms of the bodily…her poetry is inevitably posited in opposition to…the intellectual, the literary" (22). The racialization of the body in a culture of anti-"identity politics" leads to the exclusion of Asian Americans from the literary canon due to racial identity not being considered "literary" enough. Thus the relationship between the racialized body and literature is a troubled one. Not only must Asian American poets contend with English as a hegemonic language from which they are constantly perceived to be "outside of," but they must also contend with the cultural and hegemonic history of English poetry itself. In particular, "the act of writing itself…takes on a heightened sense of self-consciousness because of [Asian Americans'] constitutive exclusion from the category of native speaker" (27). To write in English, then, is to write Asian American identity into existence through asserting some kind of relationship to the language and its poetry, whether that be in disrupting traditional form and style or finding a place within it. In any case, writing and language are fundamental to understanding how poets express identity in the context of English language hegemony and the category of "native speaker."

Similarly to how racialization through English language hegemony relates to the formation of Asian American identity in poetry, racialized violence in the US has in many ways shaped Asian American identity. For one, English language hegemony as a system of power centering whiteness can be seen as a form of racialized violence towards Asian Americans in and of itself. Beyond just this, though, Asian American literature provides a lens through which the

nature of American violence itself manifests, especially in the context of gender, sexuality, and race, and thus influences the identities of the groups it targets.

The relationship between violence and masculinity in Asian American literature and culture has been discussed as an important aspect of the representation of Asian American identity in literature. Viet Thanh Nguyen identifies 1968 as a turning point in Asian American identity, as the year in which the term "Asian American" was coined, and when Asian American activists "began to see violence as a tool they could use for agency, rather than only as a weapon that targeted them as objects" (130). Despite the "emasculation of Chinese American men by exploiting their labor and excluding them from American society," Asian Americans discovered around this time that "violence could also be used to *re*masculinize themselves" through dismantling stereotypes targeting Asian masculinity (130). This movement, which Nguyen identifies in the contemporary Chinese American novel, is clearly related to gender and identity as it pertains to violence in Asian American literature.

Asian American poets have instead responded to violence directly through language and form. Juliana Chang notes how Asian American poets often "construc[t]…alternative forms and structures that simultaneously reveal and disrupt more socially dominant structures" (94). Chang cites how Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* "recovers violence that is often 'covered up' in official discourse by enacting and embodying violence in the very form of her sentence structure," through experimental elements such as sentence fragments with no clear subject or object, which she links to bodily violence, calling them "'decapitated forms'" (94). In Chang's analysis, violence towards the Asian body becomes language—physically manifesting in maimed forms and sentences. For Asian Americans, then, violence relates to both language and identity, as it is through language that poets represent and dismantle violence, as well as

expressing an identity in the context of such violence. Thus, in order to understand how poets' use of language leads to the formation of Asian American identity, one must also face the violence that influences and becomes embedded in the poetry itself.

Another aspect of language and embodiment that Asian American poets must contend with is how to subvert the pervasion of the conception of the national body, and national identity, as a white one. Shimakawa writes about the Asian American body in performance, using "abjection" as a way to think about the body. Shimakawa argues that "scholars of the politics of representation, and particularly of performance, must grapple with the connections linking the body, the image, and the polis, in other words, connections between affect and effect" (4). Shimakawa identifies the link between this racism and the body as such: "[t]he immigrant *body,* then, poses a particular kind of threat to the (literal and symbolic) 'American' body" (7). The idea of the "literal and symbolic" American body can be seen in the way that immigrant bodies are posited vis-à-vis a figurative national body. Shimakawa writes that

> "[t]he bodily discourse that fueled the anti-immigrant, anti-immigration legislation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries…constructed the figurative 'national body' as an organism that must be protected from contamination or infection by the contagion…that the immigrant body represents." (8)

The representation of the nation as a body, itself "contaminated" by literal bodies, suggests that the Asian American body faces a two-fold oppression—once as a racialized body, and again as a threat to the white, "national" body. Just as Asian American bodies are perceived as a threat to the white national body, they are tied to Asian American identity, and American identity more broadly.

2.2. New Representations of Identity in Twenty-first Century Asian American Poetry

In the context of the history of Asian American poetry, I have argued that one of the main shifts in the twenty-first century was the newfound focus on diversity within the field. While the inclusion of more diverse voices has certainly become a focus in publishing, canonization, and scholarship, within the poetry itself the representations of Asian American identity have shifted beyond just the fact that "Asian American" encompasses more people than were previously accepted to fit the definition. These poets are not interested in merely hybridizing two cultures or languages, but place particular emphasis on the idea of creation, especially in relation to identity. I argue that the issues of language, embodiment, and violence must be blurred or ambiguated in order for an Asian American identity to be created within Asian American poetry. For Vang and Vuong, the violence of the wars from which they fled creates a new, distinctly Asian American identity through the ambiguity of language and body. For Choi and Chang, writing poetry functions as a way to find a new home within language that exceeds the limiting binary divisions that marginalize Asian American identities. In my argument, I build on the scholarly conversation which acknowledges how the racialization of language, violence, and the body in the United States creates a marginalized "Asian American" community through its relation to the standard, superior construct of the "white," "normal," American. As many scholars have noted, Asian American writers are deeply interested in destabilizing this racist paradigm through writing and language. I then argue that the ultimate result of this destabilization is the very formation of a new, twenty-first century Asian American identity that encompasses diverse histories and transcends the binary divisions that oppress them.

3. Violence and Creation: Ocean Vuong and Mai Der Vang

As poetry concerning the refugee experience, the works of Ocean Vuong and Mai Der Vang are deeply concerned with violence. For these poets, Asian American identity is contingent upon violence, such as the wars in Southeast Asia that created much of the Vietnamese and Hmong-Laotian diaspora. In their constructions of identity, I argue that *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and *Afterland* represent three crucial components of diasporic identity. First is violence—the inciting factor which either forces migration or persecutes migrants once they arrive in their new homes. Second, I find that this violence typically results in a confounding of identity, in which crucial aspects such as the body, geography, and language blur together, reflecting the hybridity of Asian American identity. Out of this space, however, comes the third and final aspect—creation. Though the inherently destructive nature of violence is fully acknowledged, the poems also express that something new is being created out of this destruction.

In this section, I trace the movement from violence to troubled identity to creation in close readings of "Your Mountains Lie Down with You" and "Mother of People without Script" by Mai Der Vang, and "The Gift" and "Notebook Fragments" by Ocean Vuong. Though each poem represents these ideas differently, I find that the overall movement within each poem follows the pattern of violence leading to ambiguity and a final creation of identity. As such, the relationship between violence, identity, and creation is an important and innovative part of twenty-first century Asian American poetry.

3.1. "Your Mountains Lie Down with You": Geographies in Translation

The trauma of leaving one's homeland manifests in both collections as an exploration of loss among Asian American refugees. The poems particularly emphasize a feeling of grief

created by both the physical displacement from and active destruction of the speakers' homelands. However, they also emphasize how a new home sprouts from the soil of this grief. This relationship between diasporic peoples and their homelands drives the poem, "Your Mountain Lies Down with You." Narratively, the poem describes the speaker laying her grandfather to rest, not in his native mountains of Laos, but in California. The representation of violence manifests primarily in the description of the grandfather's experience of forced displacement, ostensibly due to the civil war. After the US pulled out of the wars in Southeast Asia, the Communist Pathet Lao targeted the Hmong since the Hmong were mostly allied with the US and Vang Pao (Moua 4). This led to the Hmong diaspora extending to the US and other countries in the Americas and Europe. The grandfather's burial in a foreign land thus stems directly from war.

The poem opens with a description of the grandfather as "a refugee, an exile," which further implicates the relationship between violence and homeland ("Your Mountains Lie Down with You" 2). Not just an "immigrant," the grandfather's status as "refugee" and "exile" suggests that he was cast out of his home country and forced to find a new space to inhabit. When the speaker asks, "Is that the jungle flower you plucked when you fled, the one you cradled / all the way to the ghettos of St. Paul where you first settled?" the flower becomes symbolic of the grandfather's impossible desire to grasp onto his homeland despite being separated from it (16-18). The word "cradled" implies intimacy and love, which contrasts words such as "fled" and "ghettos," which invoke feelings of fear, loss, destitution, and violence. Thus the violence embedded in "Your Mountains Lie Down with You" creates the sense that despite the grandfather's desperate wish to remain connected to his origin, he ultimately found himself torn away from it, buried in a distant land.

The poem expresses how the trauma of the grandfather's displacement complicates his identity (along with the speaker's) through a blurring of the distinction between geography and the body. The embodiment of the landscape is crucial to the poem's representation of violence and identity from the opening onwards:

> Mourn the poppies, the mangosteen and dragonfruit.
>
> But you come as refugee, an exile, a body seeking mountains
> meaning the same in translation.
>
> Here they are. (1-4)

The first word, "mourn" sets the elegiac theme of the piece. Yet the imperative mood indicates that it is the grandfather who is mourning, rather than the speaker. Moreover, he mourns not the death of people but "the poppies, the mangosteen, and dragonfruit." These plants, as integral parts of the Laotian landscape, represent the geography of the grandfather's home. This links geography to the idea of the body, suggesting that just as people die when their bodies fail, so too do homelands. In this way, even as the grandfather dies, he grieves the death or loss of his former home, itself an embodied space. The importance of the body to geography and home extends to the next phrase, "a body seeking mountains / meaning the same in translation." Here, the use of the word "a body" in the list containing "refugee" and "exile" emphasizes that the trauma of diasporic peoples is located in the body, not just the social or psychological self. This embodied state then extends to the land, as the body seeks "mountains," which relates back to the Grandfather's death, burial, and decomposition as a return to home as well as a physical and spiritual fusion of body and geography.

The connection between geography and the body continually develops throughout the rest of the poem, with the land taking on bodily signifiers and the grandfather's body becoming

one with the land. For instance, the lines, “Place your palms on the grasslands. Feel the foothills rise / with gray pine and blue oak,” urge the grandfather to connect to the land through the physical touch of the body to the earth (5-6). The “palms” signify a closeness to the land, as placing one’s “palms” on the ground requires positioning the body such that the head and the chest are close to the ground, and the hands produce the most sensitive experience of touch. This expands in the next line, where the phrase “Feel the foothills rise” reveals how the intimacy achieved through the “palms” allows one to corporeally experience and appreciate the geography so often unnoticed beneath one’s feet. The motion of the “foothills ris[ing]” mirrors the body in two ways: one, its movement suggests that the land is alive and ever-shifting, just as a human body would be, and two, as the body lowers to touch its hands to the earth, the earth “rise[s]” in counterpoint. Thus, the body of the grandfather becomes “geograph-ied” in the same moment that the land becomes embodied, implying not only an intimacy between the Hmong man and the Midwestern soil, but a fusion of the two—they become both bodies and geographies simultaneously.

This naturally leads to the conclusion of the poem, where the embodiment of land materializes through the act of burial. It is here that the creation that arises out of the violence of dislocation becomes apparent, seemingly paradoxically:

> Grandfather, you are not buried in the green mountains of Laos
> but here in the Tollhouse hills, earth and heaven to oak gods.
>
> Your highlands have come home,
> and now you finally sleep. (19-22)

Though the grandfather’s death becomes apparent here, the poem demonstrates how, even in death, a new body and geography are being created. Though the speaker at first reminds

her grandfather that “you are not buried in the green mountains of Laos,” they later assert with confidence that “Your highlands have come home.” The word “highlands” could refer to either “Laos” or “the Tollhouse hills,” thus conflating, or translating, the two mountain ranges. This suggests that despite the memory and suffering of losing his homeland in Asia, the grandfather has created a new home in the hills of America. The phrase “earth and heaven to oak gods” also indicates a level of geographic syncretism of sorts, in which the spirituality of the Hmong adapts to a new, and at first foreign, environment. Thus, rather than being a poem about the destruction of home and culture, “Your Mountain Lies Down with You” imagines the building of a new home, one that does not forget Laos, but still also incorporates all of the unique beauty of the United States. In the same way, the burial of the body allows new ideas of life to come into being. The line “Your highlands have come home” again presents the land itself as a moving body, paralleling the title of the poem. The fact that the land lies down with the body rather than the other way around thus reveals that the land is itself a body, and in dying the grandfather becomes a part of this body in the never-ending cycle of life and death.

The importance of language and geography also traces how diasporic movement confounds these two aspects of identity, but ultimately creates something new. For example, in the third line, the word “translation” indicates that the geographical and bodily displacement of the poem is also linguistic, as the speaker urges their Grandfather to “translat[e]” the “the green mountains of Laos” to “the Tollhouse hills” (19-20). Finally, the short stanza, “Here they are,” asserts that, through “translation,” diasporic people can find a new home even in places that are far from their homeland. Later in the poem, the use of simile also makes an argument about the possibilities of translation: “You will see Mount Whitney is as beautiful as Phou Bia. / The moon is sharp enough to cut your ear as the one from your village” (12-13). The simile works as a

translator of sorts—though it does not imply that the two are the same in every way, it does assert that they are equally "beautiful" in their difference. Just the same, translation between languages does not replicate meaning precisely, but instead allows people to look at the same idea through a different cultural lens. Thus the poem views cultural, geographic, and linguistic translation not merely as a loss of history and identity but a manifestation of a new, multicultural existence. The personification of plants, such as in the lines, "And notice how these budding magnolias gesture / like the petals on a dok champa" further illustrates the importance of language. The word "gesture" ties back to the embodied landscapes, but also invokes the idea of non-verbal and cross-cultural communication. Here too, the English name "magnolias" (a plant native to Southeast Asia) is compared to the Laotian name "dok champa" ("plumeria," in English). Both of these plants exist in North America and Southeast Asia, yet the poem utilizes the English name for one and the Laotian name for another, while again using a simile to compare how the flowers themselves "gesture" to the grandfather. Thus, as a Laotian American refugee, the grandfather (or perhaps the speaker) gains the ability to translate between languages, cultures, and geographies, rather than losing his native language and homeland.

3.2. "The Gift": Body Becomes Language

Ocean Vuong's poem, "The Gift," deals with the struggle of learning how to write in English as the speaker practices writing the alphabet with a woman (likely the speaker's mother). In this poem, the body becomes intertwined not only with language, but with the particular issue of written and verbal language. It opens with the writing exercise itself, but quickly transforms:

a b c a b c a b c

She doesn't know what comes after.
So we begin again:

a b c a b c a b c

but I can see the fourth letter:
a strand of black hair—unraveled
from the alphabet
& written
on her cheek. (1-9)

The poem is self-aware of its own existence as a written artifact, one that can only be read by literate individuals. The inclusion of the "*a b c*" lines embeds the writing of the speaker and the mother into the text itself, drawing attention to the poem as a piece of writing. The poem must contend, then, with the fact that the subjects of the poem could not read the poem which represents them. Through blurring the line between the text as discrete object and text as metatextual collage, "The Gift" examines the ways in which writing, as a form of power and subjectivity, is still a privileged medium.

The violence of the poem, though unspoken, exists in the dominance of the English language in the US and the oppressions that such a system produces. The repetition of the "*a b c*" lines, along with lines like "So we begin again" and "*Again.* & again," demonstrates the diligence of the characters, but it also implies the difficulty that they experience in attempting to learn English ("The Gift" 1, 3, 24). Concerning the politics of "correct" English in Asian American poetry, Fickle notes that "the persistent valorization of grammatically 'Standard' or 'proper' English and the denigration of its 'bastardized' Engrish [sic] counterparts, then, is nothing less than the reification of whiteness as the socially correct native 'standard' of American national identity" ("English before Engrish" 85). Here, the characters' struggles with

English language acquisition represent a social context in which non-English speakers experience heightened marginalization. The description of the mother, “Even now the nail salon / will not leave her,” also suggests a working class status, which combined with linguistic hardships, paints a picture of the immigrant family as one facing social oppression, despite their best efforts. It is here in which the violence lies—the pressures of English-language hegemony and its connections with class and race act as violent agents against the speaker and his mother.

However, the introduction of the “strand of black hair” challenges the conception of standard written English through representing the letter that “she doesn’t know” as a hair on her cheek, blurring the line between body and language. The hair’s status as “the fourth letter” indicates that, for the speaker and the woman, written language exists in forms other than the Latin alphabet. Her hair, in its ability to signify, becomes a form of writing “on her cheek.” Hair is also a part of the human body, and thus the poem ambiguates the distinction between language and the body through a moment of body becoming written language. The fact that it becomes “the fourth letter” which she “doesn’t know” also conveys a sense of redefining language. Though the fourth letter is made up of pieces of herself, she cannot put it into writing. The word “unraveled / from the alphabet” also suggests that refiguring writing such that hair becomes language requires an “unravel[ing]” of writing and the English language itself, a way of returning to an original state, the way cloth unraveled becomes thread. This leads to the conclusion that in undoing language, the speaker finds that his mother has, in her own body, the letters that she cannot put to paper. Later in the poem, the reverse also occurs, as tools of writing become embodied:

The b bursting its belly
as dark dust blows
through a blue-lined sky.

Don't move, she says, as she picks
a wing bone of graphite
from the yellow carcass, slides it back
between my fingers. (17-23)

The words "belly," "wing bone," and "carcass" describe the written letters, the graphite, and the pencil respectively, using corporeal signifiers. Where before the hair represented a body becoming writing, here, writing becomes the body. The use of alliteration ("b," "bursting," "belly," "blows," "blue," "bone," "back" "between") heightens this relationship, since the letter "b," as both a written construct and a body, is emphasized. The description of the letter "b" as having a "belly" demystifies it, acting as a reminder of the fact that "b" has no sound or meaning inherent in its shape—it is just that, a shape, a shape that resembles a "belly." Yet at the same time, the repetition of the "b" draws attention to it, thus re-imbuing it with its associated sounds and meanings. This complicates the relationship between writing, language, sound, and orality—though writing evokes sound, it does not produce sound in the same way that oral speech does. The letter "b" thus represents silence and sound, and body and writing, simultaneously.

The ambivalence towards written and verbal language continues into the final stanza, which leads to even more new understandings of language:

I see it: the strand of hair lifting
from her face… how it fell
onto the page—& lived,
with no sound. Like a word.
I still hear it. (25-29)

As the hair makes contact with the page, it begins to resemble language even more. Yet the word "lived" ties it back into the body. Hair, interestingly, is a part of the living, growing, and moving body, yet it is also in some ways dead, as hairs have no blood circulation. Language by extension represents itself ambiguously in "The Gift," as both alive and dead, both visual and verbal. Though the hair had "no sound," the speaker remarks, "I still hear it," paradoxically blending silence and sound. This perhaps reflects the processing of written language as it pertains to spoken language—when readers consume a text, they often "hear" the language in their head, despite the fact that writing, almost by definition, has no sound. Thus, just as the body is simultaneously living and dying, the written poem calls attention to itself as both sonic and silent. If the "sound" of language brings it to life, and the silence of language represents a kind of death, then the auditory processing of written language represents a kind of life out of death, or rebirth, of both language and the body. Though the beauty of spoken language and oral traditions are somehow lost in the very process of writing them down, writing also preserves them and gives them a new life, one that differs in form but is not lesser.

"The Gift" also ties geography into its exploration of language and body. In the third stanza, the speaker describes their mother's appearance and scent:

> Even now the nail salon
> will not leave her: isopropyl acetate,
> ethyl acetate, chloride, sodium lauryl
> sulfate & sweat fuming
> through her pink
> I ♥ NY t-shirt. (10-15)

The poem concerns itself with the idea of bodies carrying geographies with them, albeit in a strikingly different way than Vang's poems longing for the jungles of Laos. Nevertheless, "The

Gift" still explores how "the nail salon / will not leave her," just as the mountains of Vang's poetry cannot leave her characters. The list of chemical names highlights the complications of language once again, with their difficult spellings and their general unfamiliarity to most people. However, the last word being "sweat" rather than another synthetic chemical ties these scents back to the body, as sweat naturally occurs on the skin, suggesting that these chemical solutions have become embodied through her work. The final line, "her pink / I ♥ NY t-shirt" contrasts the chemical names preceding it with its sheer simplicity, use of visual symbols that even illiterate people could read, and its abbreviations. Yet it's worth noting too that even this simplicity can be obfuscating, as it's possible for people to be unaware that "NY" stands for "New York," or that a heart translates directly to the word "love." In addition, the location of "NY" once again calls attention to the importance of geography. As a metropolis and cultural center of the US, New York in many ways represents America. The placement of "NY" on the woman's shirt suggests an embodiment of America and American identity in addition to complicating ideas of written language.

Though the writing exercise, the T-shirt and the nail salon symbolize the oppressions that the mother faces as an Asian immigrant, the poem's conclusion transforms these representations of violence into a space of creation. The description of the hair as it "lived / with no sound. Like a word" feels ambivalent, as it "lived" but could not make a "sound," and therefore could not become spoken language. The phrase "like a word" uses simile, which though it compares or even equates two alike things, it cannot entirely fuse them—it still acknowledges that they are different. Yet the final line, "I still hear it," returns to the present tense and creates the sense that though the hair cannot fully become writing, it can transcend the boundaries of writing and language themselves. The ability for the speaker to "hear" the hair as language reflects the

importance of this moment in his relationship with his mother. This ties back into the title of the poem, "The Gift." The poem never describes a literal gift, which draws attention to the odd title. Yet perhaps "The Gift" is the hair, or the relationship that the speaker builds with his mother, or the poem itself. Just as the poem draws attention to itself as written artifact, it becomes a gift through its representation of a love that thrives despite being surrounded by oppression and violence.

3.3. "Mother of People without Script": Writing and Hmong Subjectivity

Vang's "Mother of People without Script" also deals with language and writing, but this poem does so through telling the story of the creation of the Hmong script. Narratively, this poem focuses on the story of Shong Lue Yang, who created a writing system for the Hmong language. Until Lue Yang invented his writing system, the Hmong language historically had no standard writing system. Lue Yang acted as a messiah figure, often considered to be one of the twelve sons of God, and called "Mother of Writing" ("*Niam Ntawv*") or "Savior of the People" (Koau Vang et al. 1-2). The lack of a written literary and historical record eliminates Hmong subjectivity (their culture is always being described by non-Hmong writers) and centers "Imperialist powers, China and the West" who "maintai[n] the national paradigm" and "render…the Hmong…as illiterate and in need of civilizing" (Ma Vang 89). Within this context, the very premise of the poem can be seen as a response to violence. As Vang notes, "a history of colonial violence and Hmong running away as a form of resistance has been noted as the primary reason why the Hmong do not have a country" (89). Thus the relationship between violence, language, and geography historically has been of great importance to the Hmong, and this manifests in Mai Der Vang's folkloric, poetic representation of how Hmong writing came into being.

In its ambiguation of language, “Mother of People without Script” centers the issue of translation. Near the middle of the poem, a set of indented stanzas use Hmong words to explore translation:

> *Paj* is not *pam* is not *pab.*
> Blossom is not blanket is not help.
>
> *Ntug* is not *ntuj* is not *ntub*.
> Edge is not wet is not sky. (6-9)

This section clearly deals with translation, as the paralleled sentence structures in couplets convey that the Hmong words correspond to the English words below. However, all of the Hmong words look similar, but create English words that appear unrelated. None of the English words have similar meanings or pronunciations, yet, in Hmong translation they become sonically similar, which reveals one of the difficulties of translation: the relationships between sounds in the original language is lost. In fact, the poem here plays with sound to further this difficulty. The last letter of syllables in Romanized Hmong reflects the syllable’s pitch, not its vowel and consonant structure. Thus, each of the Hmong words listed would be pronounced with the same “sound,” distinguished only by their different intonation patterns. English has essentially no words that are distinguished only by pitch, and thus monolingual English speakers often cannot distinguish words in tonal languages like Hmong. This in some ways draws attention to the information that writing includes, and the information it leaves behind. Though the Hmong script conveys pitch insofar as it distinguishes separate words, written language cannot convey precisely the tone, timbre, and intonation of the human voice. Therefore, though written languages come close to approximating the sounds of spoken language, the nuanced information conveyed in how people speak is lost in the process of putting language to paper.

The transformative power of writing is further elucidated in the next section. The line, "Now you are *Niam Ntawv*" indicates that the addressee has become something new through the word "now" (18). The phrase "*Niam Ntawv*" (which translates roughly to "mother of writing" or "mother of paper") also emphasizes creation, as motherhood entails the creation of life. This also ties back to the body, as motherhood represents the creation of a new body, thus suggesting once again that language, and particularly writing, is in a way a body. In the earlier lines in which writing will "leave behind the silver / your body won't shed," the word "shed" implies metamorphosis, like a butterfly shedding its cocoon (16-17). However, the body "won't" shed on its own—rather, it is the "obsidian mask" of writing that will "leave behind" what the body cannot discard on its own (14, 16). Thus writing is instrumental not only in its ability to preserve pieces of the body and the mind, but also in the way it fundamentally transforms the body and its reality.

As the poem reaches its conclusion, the idea of remaining after death becomes central to its argument. The final three lines, "When they could take no more, / when all that you had was given, / you lined your grave with paper" directly ties the idea of death and writing together (22-24). This section expresses ambivalence about the earlier parts of the poem, such as how "lining your grave with paper" contrasts the emphasis on life embedded in the phrase "*Niam Ntawv*," or "mother of paper." Yet still there exists a sense of defiance and creation through the act of "lining your grave with paper." The lines before, "When they could take no more, / when all that you had was given," imply that the second-person actor here has lost everything. The fact that an unnamed "they" took everything suggests that this loss was incurred due to violence or persecution by other humans. This reflects Lue Yang's assassination in 1971, as his movement (involving various teachings including writing) was perceived as a threat by both the Pathet Lao

and the Hmong who opposed the Pathet Lao (Koau Vang et al. 2). This represents a historical moment in which violence targeting a specific group and elements of their identity (the Hmong people, language, and writing system) results in both loss and creation. The creation can be seen in the fact that despite that the "you" in the poem (Lue Yang) has nothing left, he still manages to line his grave with paper. Though the ending is melancholy, it asserts that writing somehow has the ability to supersede all the mortal loss of the body's life. In both death and the creation of life, writing appears to be central in both preserving and reimagining the body.

"Mother of People without Script" is also concerned with geography and movement in its construction of writing. Particularly, the lines "On sheet of bamboo / with indigo branch" convey that writing is deeply connected to place (10-11). "[B]amboo" and "indigo" are native to tropical Asia, calling attention to the relationship between the Hmong homeland and Hmong writing. In addition, plants, though living beings, constitute a part of what we understand to be geography. Thus, the transformation of "bamboo" and "indigo" into paper and writing utensils marks also a transformation of the land into writing. This also reveals the materiality of writing—since it requires physical objects, writing can always be connected to the land from which these materials were sourced. Hmong writing, then, is built out of Hmong land, as the poem argues that language and geography are not separate ideas but that language comes out of geography.

The opening lines call upon culture and physical place in similar ways. The claim that "You swear the twin spirits / taught you to write" relates to Hmong traditional spirituality, again emphasizing the importance of Hmong culture to language (1-2). When "At night, you climbed / the leaves to hear the gods," the movement functions on two levels: literal and metaphorical. On the literal level, the character climbs a tree (another plant and part of the Asian landscape) to "hear the gods." The movement upwards through the leaves indicates a sort of bridging between

the land and the sky, and between the human and the divine. This then connects to writing through the image of "climb[ing] / the leaves" metaphorically representing leafing through pieces of paper filled with letters. The fact that this act allows one to "hear the gods" demonstrates how something new is created in the act of writing—in this poem, it moves one closer to the voices of gods. This line in particular calls upon Lue Yang, as his writing system "validated him as God's messiah because Hmong mythology includes a theme that writing is a gift from God" (Koau Vang et al. 2). Writing thus functions not only as a way of simultaneously preserving and reinventing the body and the geography it inhabits, but a direct connection to God.

Ma Vang notes that for Hmong in modern times, whose histories have traditionally been defined by outside powers with written records, writing itself is an act of resistance, of asserting Hmong subjectivity. In particular, Ma Vang argues that "Hmong American literary formations assert writing as a political project of existing and being" (90). In this sense, the second-person "you," or Lue Yang, as himself the "mother of writing," represents both the creation of a new way of writing and a new form of reifying Hmong existence. Beyond this, though, the poem itself, as a piece of writing partially in Hmong, written by a Hmong woman, and concerning Hmong language and identity, is reshaping the canon of existing knowledge of the Hmong people from a Hmong perspective. This calls back upon Choi's expression of the need for diversification in Asian American poetry, as Hmong American poetry, which has been historically elided from the canon, creates new meanings out of its own particular histories of violence and displacement. The expression of writing as a form of creating new identities, beauty, and meaning out of spaces of violence confirms the importance of Asian American poetry in general, but especially for the Hmong.

3.4. "Notebook Fragments": Violence and Creation

Perhaps no poem demonstrates the necessary relationship between violence and creation as clearly as Vuong's "Notebook Fragments." With lines such as "Grandma said *In the war they would grab a baby, a soldier at each ankle, and pull… / Just like that"* and "7:18. Kevin overdosed last night. His sister left a message. Couldn't listen / to all of it. That makes three this year," the poem's interest in violence is without question (6-7, 15-16). Interesting to note in the poem is the sheer variety of violence reported, from war crimes in Vietnam to losing a friend to a drug epidemic. As the title suggests, "Notebook Fragments" consists of a series of free verse stanzas documenting reflections on brief moments or experiences. No stanza is more than two lines long, and many of them have seemingly little connection to the preceding and succeeding stanzas, though the poem often calls back upon them later. The formal choice here allows the poem to paint a full picture of the scope of American violence, as it affects the speaker in vastly different ways at different times, connected through the "notebook." For the speaker, American violence itself can be understood as a series of "fragments," seemingly distinct and unrelated at first, yet tied together in their shared sense of loss and injustice. The Vietnam War and the surge in overdose-related deaths appear at first two be separate phenomena, but the poem, in placing them in a collection of "fragments," suggests that they are both pieces of the same, greater whole. "Notebook Fragments" is not concerned merely with violence, but the particular scope of American violence, and the ways in which it permeates every aspect of daily life.

Similar to other poems in both collections, the issue of translation plays a large role in the ambiguation of language in relation to identity. The speaker traces the possible etymologies of the Vietnamese word for "grenade," remarking that "The Vietnamese word for grenade is 'bom,' from the French 'pomme,' / meaning apple. / Or was it American for 'bomb?'" (32-34). The

poem plays with the sonic similarity between the French "pomme" and English "bomb," and how their originally unrelated meanings became similar in Vietnamese. The use of French and English, especially in the context of the word "grenade," signals legacies of colonialization and war at the expense of the Vietnamese people. The fact that these instances of violence permeated the language and became intractable suggests that the violence of the war is now embedded into the culture of Vietnam, even after the war. The relationship between violence and translation continues in a later stanza, which compares food to weapons: "Eggplant = cà pháo = 'grenade tomato.' Thus nourishment defined / by extinction" (42-43). The use of the equal signs implies that the meaning or content of each word should be equivalent. Yet the addition of each new translation, from English to Vietnamese to the literal English components of the Vietnamese, adds new meaning that was previously invisible to non-Vietnamese speakers. This demonstrates both the ambivalence of translation (it can convey "equivalent" meaning but is never exactly the same) and how violence shapes language. Just as the violence of the Vietnam War was largely unfelt by those outside Vietnam, the histories of violence in the Vietnamese language are impenetrable to speakers of other languages, even in translation. This also allows the speaker to draw the comparison between "nourishment" and "extinction," which ties back to the theme of violence and creation. In "Notebook Fragments," destruction and creation, and death and survival, are inherently intertwined and ambiguous, and this manifests in an exploration of the space in between the Vietnamese and English languages.

The body, especially in relation to sexuality, is also complicated by violence. In one of the longest stretches of continuous narrative in the poem, the speaker details an encounter with a man:

I met a man tonight. A high school English teacher
from the next town. A small town. Maybe

I shouldn't have, but he had the hands
of someone I used to know. Someone I was used to.

The way they formed brief churches
over the table as he searched for the right words.

I met a man, not you. In his room the Bibles shook on the shelf
from candlelight. His scrotum a bruised fruit. I kissed it

lightly, the way one might kiss a grenade
before hurling it into the night's mouth.

Maybe the tongue is also a key. (44-54)

The passage begins with the body as a site of familiarity, as the speaker remarks that they were drawn to the partner because "he had the hands / of someone I used to know." Quickly, though, the body becomes more than just the body, as the hands "formed brief churches / over the table." The image of the "church" conveys both a sense of sacredness and danger, especially in the context of the persecution of sexuality within many religious spaces in the US. This manifests in the eerie image of how "the Bibles shook on the shelf / from candlelight," in which the flickering light cast on the Bibles symbolizes the speaker's wavering or ambivalent relationship to them. The figurative transformation of the body into a potential site of danger continues in the lines, "His scrotum a bruised fruit. I kissed it / lightly, the way one might kiss a grenade / before hurling it into the night's mouth." The "bruised fruit" calls back upon the "Eggplant" or "grenade tomato" from earlier. The scrotum then extends the idea of "nourishment defined / by extinction"

to sexuality, as the dangers of sex and sex as "nourishment" exist concomitantly for the speaker. The imaginative leap from scrotum to grenade evinces the way in which the body, even in moments of pleasure, contains within itself images of violence. The final image, "the tongue is also a key," again takes a part of the body and assigns it an object or place, indicating its greater significance beyond just the body. In this case, the "key" seems to express more of the creation rather than violence. In its ability to unlock things, thereby opening them up and revealing what was hidden, the key represents how the body can be a tool to create new possibilities, even out of the violence suggested by the scrotal "grenade." In any case, the body is certainly destabilized as an ambiguous space through the speaker's process of coming to terms with violence and sexuality.

"Notebook Fragments" also deals with geography, albeit in a less direct fashion. Much of the language focused on geography also deals with movement, particularly passing through spaces as a process of arriving. One example occurs in two lines in which the speaker writes down timed memos: "6:24 a.m. Greyhound station. One-way ticket to New York City: $36.75. / 6:57 a.m. I love you, mom" (70-71). This moment briefly illustrates the importance of traversing geography for the speaker, as they record moments of movement (just as they record violence) in the series of "fragments" of their life. The idea of the "One-way ticket to New York City" calls upon common themes in diasporic literature, such as a sense of leaving something behind in search of opportunity in a new land. In addition, the following fragment, "I love you, mom," touches on the importance of family and the connection between geographic movement and familial relationships. The most striking moment of physical movement in the poem, however, occurs in its closing lines:

God must be a season, grandma said, looking out at the blizzard drowning
her garden.

My footsteps on the sidewalk were the smallest flights.

Dear god, if you *are* a season, let it be the one I passed through
to get here.

Here. That's all I wanted to be.

I promise. (78-84)

The idea of "passing through" also ties to diasporic themes, as it is the space of passage that in many ways defines the diaspora. The fact that the passage is through "the blizzard / drowning out her garden" again ties into ideas of destruction and creation. The "blizzard" covers the "garden," which suggests that an object of beauty and cultivation (i.e. the garden plants) has been destroyed. Yet the emphasis on the passage of seasons implies that spring will return, even after the losses induced by cold winters. Thus, for the speaker, passing through "god, if you are a season," represents the life and creation that comes out of a harsh winter. The concluding declaration of "Here. That's all I wanted to be. / I promise," invokes a sense of arrival at the end of a journey or passage. The use of the word "Here" is not fixed or concrete, but it indicates that wherever the speaker currently is, that is where they "wanted to be." This mirrors the diasporic arrival in a new land as a radical claiming of a new sense of "here," an idea which allows for the creation of an identity based on desire and hope (indicated by the word "wanted") rather than merely loss or estrangement.

"Notebook Fragments" uses violence to complicate aspects of identity such as language, the body and geography, and its ultimate emphasis on creation is directly linked to violence. In one fragment, the speaker writes that "An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. / Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me" (38). The second line, "no

bombs = no family = no me" draws a clear causal link between the violence of the war ("bombs") and the very existence of the speaker themselves ("me"). Despite everything that was lost during the war, the speaker would not exist without it—the world would simply not be the same in any way. The speaker's identity, their body, their traversed geographies, and their languages, were all born out of violence. Despite the tragedy of violence that the poem constantly contends with, it also acknowledges the way that violence predicated the existence of the speaker, their family, and their identity as an Asian American.

4. Boundary Destabilization and the Creation of "Home": Victoria Chang and Franny Choi

Choi's poetry of robots and sexuality appears to be wholly unrelated to Chang's sentimental expressions of grief at first glance. Yet in both *Soft Science* and *Obit*, there exists a distinctly twenty-first century expression of Asian American identity—one that is born out of violence and a blurring of ideas considered to be diametrically opposed (such as "Asian" v. "American"). Whether in comments received on social media and in online chat rooms as a queer Asian woman, or in a white writer's representation of anti-Asian violence, both Choi and Chang write about the small acts of violence towards Asians that permeate contemporary American society. As the poems represent these acts of violence they also question the distinctions from which that violence often arises, distinctions such as what it means to be Asian or American, embodied or disembodied, or a native or non-native English speaker, rendering them misleading, ironic, or even nonsensical. In this section, I analyze the poems of Choi and Chang, arguing that through disrupting these black-and-white distinctions, both poets find a "home" in language that they create through writing.

4.1 Asian American Identity as a Transgression of Dichotomy

The term "Asian American" inherently defies binary, as Asian Americans inhabit a space which cannot be accurately described as merely "Asian" or "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. I draw upon Zhou's argument

concerning how "there is no fixed ethnicity to reclaim, no 'home' to dwell in in English" to argue that just as "Asian American poets reinvent new ways of saying and hearing" in order to construct a linguistic "home," they also reinvent form, geography, embodiment, and history (Zhou 2). 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 form ("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 supposedly black and white distinctions. The binary distinction between "Asia" and "America" makes the possibility of Asian American identity impossible, insofar as "Asian American" cannot fit into this binary since it has elements of both Asian and American identities separately, but is not wholly one nor the other. Per Zhou's analysis of finding "home" in English through inventing new ways of saying, Choi and Chang find "home" in multiple other ways by inventing new ways of understanding form, geography, language, the body, and history.

Choi and Chang play with a variety of forms with different relationships to both Eastern and Western poetic traditions (such as the crown of sonnets, tanka, and obituary). In both form and content, Choi and Chang draw 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 Romanized Mandarin (such as the word "*lao mei*," which also invites questions of Chinese and American identity) blurs the line between the two languages and the two identities ("Home" 17). In addition, Choi's examination of English-language "impersonation" examines the relationship between the Asian poet's assumed "whiteness" and how this relates to English. The poets also question the nature of the body, and contend 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 ("Imitation Games"). Finally, the poems blur 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 five 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." In doing so, they construct 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.

4.2. Form: Reinventing Formal Tradition

Both *Soft Science* and *Obit* utilize a variety of forms, such as tanka, sonnets, blank verse 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, such as sonnets and elegies. On the other hand, "low" forms of poetry represent traits opposite of these, namely a lack of institutional or popular recognition as a deep and complex form of art. Some of these forms, such as Chang's obituaries, are typically not considered to be poetic forms at all. For Choi's *Soft Science*, the destabilization of "high" and "low" poetry occurs largely in the tensions between 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 formal rules and thematic conventions of traditional sonnets in order to reinvent it as a form beyond the limiting binary of "high" and "low" through the use of an elevated form with content reflecting filth and sexual excess. 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 two words) establishes the metric atmosphere in a distinct and 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. 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. More importantly, the content of the poem departs from the traditional themes associated with the sonnet. In the poem, 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). The lexical tension fuses the high, elevated theme of religion with a manifold exploration of decay, hunger, and filth. Importantly, the form here is not merely a series of sonnets but a crown, in which the last line of one sonnet becomes the first line of the next. Traditionally, such as in the famous prologue to John Donne's *Holy Sonnets,* crowns of sonnets deal with Christian themes ("Corona"). As such, the poem acknowledges the history of the form through its lexicon of religion, while disrupting it with a lexicon of disgust. Though the sonnet has historically dealt with many themes, traditional sonnets often concern "love, politics, or religion" in a "lyrical mood" ("Sonnet"). Choi's depiction of an online chatroom filled with "skin-starved cocks" and a space full of lust and perversion, however, certainly departs from all of the traditional themes, such as love and religion, associated with the form. The poem is neither "high" nor "low," since it seamlessly blends a prestigious, elite form with content that the revels in both filth and religion. Thus "Chatroulette" opposes the distinction between "high" and "low" poetry through its ambivalence towards its own form, which expresses a simultaneous disgust and reverence towards a space of complex, intertwining filth and beauty, or, as Choi puts it, a "dirty church" (2).

Chang's collection, *Obit,* invokes a similar exploration of different forms of poetry, though in addition to playing with the relationship between form and content, 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 to be poetry but a form

of journalism. The "high" poetic form of the elegy dates back to Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid, and the "Roman love elegy" still enjoys "popularity and prestige" ("Elegy"). The elegy often features powerful emotions, such as "sorrow, shock, rage, longing, melancholy, and resolution…often in quick succession" ("Elegy"). Obituaries, by contrast, 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]rnate 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). In Chang's poetry, the obituary does not merely capture the literal death of a person, but the many little deaths that occur throughout a person's life. For example, her poem "Home" opens with the lines, "Home—died sometime around 1960 / when my mother left Taiwan. Home / died again on August 3, 2015" ("Home" 1-2). Here, the speaker mourns the death of "Home," which died once when her mother left Asia, and again when her mother literally died. This plays with the conventions of the obituary form by representing the amorphous concept of "Home" as something worthy of an obituary, and as something that can die many times throughout a person's life.

Despite the collection's focus on exploring the obituary, tanka poems are interspersed throughout 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 to be a more prestigious form than the obituary, 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.

4.3 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 and ideologies 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). Essentially, the hybridization of different poetic forms considered to be disparate in Asian American poetry parallels the hybridization of culture associated with Asian American identity. *Obit* juxtaposes two different 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 twenty-first century poetry's focus on "a postmodern deconstruction of formal stability" (180). Even though twenty-first 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"[1] 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). The mother's speech is a clear response to the violence embedded in the phrase "*squinty-eyed cunt*," which produces a space of indeterminacy, in which "lao mei" indicates that the speaker is fundamentally different than the "white writer," but despite that they both "end up in the / same place." 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 playing with different forms, 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 "nothingness" 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

[1] Mandarin word meaning "American person/people," usually referring to Americans not of Chinese descent.

fall in love" seems 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 is what 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. Per the idea of a "home" constructed through reinventing language, the last line, "Die: nobody knows this but words" ties into the relationship between language and embodiment. To die is a wholly bodily experience, as death manifests in a ceasing of the body's necessary functions. Yet it is not the body that knows death, but "words." There is a capacity for language to "know" more than the body, which ties into the idea of language creating a "home" through becoming more than violence and the body. In Chang's tankas, freedom from the specter of death and grief can only be found in destabilizing the boundaries between Asia, Europe, and America, and the building of a new formal and poetic language.

4.4 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 English over Asian languages in both American vernacular language and American literature. Yet Choi and Chang 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" (2). As such, "[r]ather 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 Romanized Mandarin word that 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. Per Zhou's observation that "Asian American poets reinvent new ways of saying," Chang's poem 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 Michael 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). Since there is something "surreal" about a single self with many faces or personae (the assumed "white" face, the true Asian face, etc.) constructed through language, the surreal mode allows poets to

linguistically impersonate various characters. 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 speaker here calls herself a "live action hologram," emphasizing the way her body is performed online, just as the poet's self is performed through language. 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). Choi finds the surreal within the literal face itself, examining the ways in which the anonymous chatroom user can become multiple people at once. 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.

4.5 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 an example of this, 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 as 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")

If what separates the body from an object is its ability to register as "real," and thereby human, to others, then the man's exclamation that he "thought she was real!" represents the disembodiment and dehumanization of Choi's body. It is only through turning her face towards him that he realizes that she is a "real," fully embodied person, not a part of an art exhibit. In this moment, the line between a body and a non-body becomes ambiguous—to be, even for a second, not

recognized as a body, transforms the body into an object, questioning whether or not it is embodied.

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, and 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"). The poem then shifts to the speaker standing next to her mother's grave, leading to 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, and 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.

4.6 The Archive: History as Embodied Present

Exploring the body also delves into questions concerning embodied histories through the construction of an “archive.” Here, I use the “archive” to refer to embodied histories and how the use of found documents or artifacts in poetry represents these histories. 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). The ability for her poetry to document history through the obituary form 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 blurring 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). Objectification of the body by representing it as "Anime Pornography" relates back to Choi's exploration of (dis)embodiment and objectification in online spaces. In addition, the translation resulting in jumbled but still intelligible English is reminiscent of the idea of "proper" English, and how technology complicates language. By incorporating text that she did not literally write but rather found and altered, Choi demonstrates how the "documental mode" allows for the building of a poetic archive that reflects the ways in which the speaker has been linguistically embodied and disembodied.

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.

4.7 Finding "Home" in Destabilized Spaces

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. The dissolution of binary oppositions is not only an

abstract philosophical concept, but a directly inhabited experience of defying categorization. Diaspora is by definition a transgression; it is a shattering of a worldview contingent upon neatly dividing humanity into discrete, identity-based groups. For Asian American poets, blurring supposedly opposed ideas 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 and identity themselves.

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 ultimate goal of dissolving binary oppositions is the construction of "home" within the indeterminacy of language. For example, rather than representing death and life as polar opposites, the poets blur them in a way that parallels the construction of Asian American identity. In a final epiphany in "Home," the line "we grow as we are / dying" is similar to 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."

Conclusion

In their essay, "Being Hmong Is Not Enough," Bee Cha argues that "The future of the Hmong should be what we are trying to create and not just what we are trying to preserve. Having said that, we need to rethink the notion of *who we are* in light of *what we are,* and not the other way around" (11). Clearly the issues of identity ("*who we are*" v. "*what we are*") are of central concern to Cha, and this extends to Hmong and Asian American literature more generally. Yet what's particularly striking about this argument is the emphasis on "what we are trying to create and not just what we are trying to preserve." Public discourses on Asian American identity sometimes narrowly focus on "preservation," of trying to rekindle what has been lost and destroyed in the violence of war, migration, and assimilation. I certainly agree that protecting traditions from the homeland is an important part of the goal of Asian American poetry. Yet in my readings of twenty-first century Asian American poetry, I find less longing for a return to traditional practices and more emphasis on the creation of something new, something unique to Asian Americans. Though elements of the dominant culture of both Asia and the US exist within Asian American poetry, the poems do not simply "preserve" these artifacts as they come. Rather, they interrogate, hybridize, and blur them, expressing the need for the creation of a new identity, one that exceeds the limiting and artificial boundaries of "Asian" and "American." Twenty-first century Asian American poetry, which deals with themes of war and racism, is not only interested in what violence destroys. It is interested in what violence creates.

Part of this creation seeks to transform the ugliness of violence into the beauty of surviving and thriving in the US. On the symbolic meanings of the wall poems at Angel Island Immigration Station, Josephine Park writes: "To turn a prison wall into something of great beauty is finally the transformative power of the work of art—and it has been the project of

Asian American poets and scholars to preserve, enliven, and continue this significant labor" (113). In carving language and culture onto the very walls that imprisoned them, the poets at Angel Island found a way to take the tools of oppression and use poetry to transform it into an expression both of beauty and identity. In literally leaving their mark on American institutions of injustice, Asian American poets both created something beautiful out of violence and carved their own subjectivity into American history. Just as "Hmong literary formations assert writing as a political project of existing and being" through rewriting their own histories rather than the hegemonic records in Chinese, French, and English, Asian American poetry politically reframes identity from an Asian American perspective (Ma Vang 90). As such, the movement finds beauty in violence and thereby resists violence's destructive power.

In many of the poems in *Afterland, Night Sky with Exit Wounds, Soft Science,* and *Obit,* the final act of creation, also working in many ways as a consolation, comes in the form of inhabiting space, of being "here." Whether it's Vang's line "But you come…seeking mountains / meaning the same in translation. / Here they are," Vuong's line, "Here. That's all I wanted to be. / I promise," or Choi's line, "My body is its image, here," the poems trace the movement from being lost in diasporic identity to an arrival "here," as a proud Asian American ("Chatroulette" 30, "Your Mountains Lie Down with You" 2-3, "Notebook Fragments" 83-84). This calls back all the way to Bulosan's anaphora, "We are there…We are there," suggesting that for nearly as long as the tradition has existed, Asian American poets have expressed their presence in America as a way of creating a strong Asian American identity, resistant to "wars," "concentration camps," "guns," and more—regardless of all of that, "We are everywhere, we are everywhere" (30-34). Thus the creative impulse driving Asian American poetry's representations of violence does more than convey the beauty of a hybrid, diasporic identity. It also radically carves out a

space for Asians to inhabit America in its creation of identity. Asian Americans have always been “here,” “there,” and “everywhere,” and their poetry sends that message out to the world. I can only imagine that this movement will expand as more poets of various backgrounds and intersections, such as Vuong, Vang, Choi, and Chang raise their voices. As Choi puts it, “Here’s to our continuing arrival” (647).

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