“Questing Forward from Experience:” Asian Diasporic Intellectual Labour & Identity Formation

by

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Asian diasporic cultural production, beyond its representational value, is a manifestation of affective migrant home-building that contributes to our understanding of the Asian diaspora in Canada and the US as a community with a distinct identity. Interview data and intertextual literary analysis demonstrate that Asian diasporic cultural production has distinctive qualities that set it apart as a form of knowledge of its own. The intellectual labour that goes into cultural production, socially navigating institutions, and generating a sense of identity does not happen unbidden. In circumstances of unbelonging and unfamiliarity, participants had to find alternative ways to go about their work that wouldn't have been available to them if not for their displacement. Asian diasporic cultural production and intellectual labour afford the ability to open boundaries of racial identity and cultural community to new possibilities.

Keywords: migration; diaspora; identity formation; literary analysis; intellectual labour; cultural production

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Table of Contents

Rumi said the two most important things in life were beauty // and bewilderment / this is likely a mistranslation // after thirty years in America my father now dreams in English // says he misses the dead relatives he used to be able to visit in sleep

Kaveh Akbar (2017:53)

Taken at Sun Wah Centre

Introduction

> *The corresponding features of Asian racialization in settler colonies capture the moving spirit of settler colonialism: a formation that is transnational but distinctively national, similar but definitely not the same, repetitive but without a predictable rhythm, structural but highly susceptible to change, everywhere but hard to isolate.*
>
> Iyko Day (2016:17)

Canada's mythology stakes a major part of its national identity in being an exemplar of multicultural tolerance and immigration policy thanks to its widely advertised success in attracting so-called highly skilled immigrants to enhance and diversify the nation's economy. A violent history of racist exclusion and the many documented hardships associated with modern immigrant life in Canada— including for immigrants privileged enough to be leaving their countries of origin as members of skilled and educated elite classes—contradicts this story.

Present surges of anti-Asian violence placing British Columbia first in the number of anti-Asian hate crime incidents per Asian capita in North America (Project 1907 2020) recall other traumatic events, from the social exclusion of Chinese labour who built the Canadian Pacific Railway and the western part of the US transcontinental railroad to the 1999 imprisonment and deportation of almost 600 Chinese refugees (Park 2010). Chinese workers were recruited to migrate to British Columbia in the late nineteenth century to fill labour shortages, such as the work of building the Western portion of the transcontinental railway (Day 2016; Park 2010). Their racialization meant employers could pay them cheap wages, afford to finish the railway projects, and finalize the consolidation of the settler nation through the railroads they built. These railroads ironically became lines to exclusion for the Chinese, as they made it easier and cheaper for settlers to arrive and enforce strategies to both prevent further migration and send resident Chinese back to China (Day 2016; Park 2010).

The Canadian Pacific Railway precipitated the founding of Vancouver in 1886. The year the railway was completed, Canada passed its first immigration restriction policy through the Chinese Head Tax, which "rose prohibitively" to economically stave off labouring classes (Day 2016:42). Just a few years after the completion of the US transcontinental railway, the US passed the 1875 Page Act to deny entry to prostitutes at the border, targeting Chinese women "on the basis of presumed sexual immorality" (Day 2016:42). Chinese men were separated from their families (Park 2010), among myriad other immigration controls enacted in both Canada and the US, resulting in the "formation of 'bachelor' communities that, as homosocial and nonreproductive spaces, reinforced fears of contagion and perversion associated with Chinese men" (Day 2016:43). In the late nineteenth century, new access to languages of disease and purity perpetuated myths of unclean Asian immigrants and justified the deportation, quarantine, and forced sterilization of immigrants, strengthening Canada's securitized border regimes (Reitmanova et al. 2015).

In British Columbia, news media propagated reports of Chinese immigrants spreading leprosy to Indigenous communities, and although it had been found that there were no cases of leprosy among the Indigenous communities and that leprosy was very rare among Chinese immigrants themselves, the city of Vancouver confined 43 Chinese men believed to be lepers in a lazaretto under harrowing living conditions (Reitmanova et al. 2015). It was presumed that immigrants left their homelands because of infectious diseases, that they carried infectious diseases that posed a serious health threat to white settlers, and that the spaces the immigrants occupied within Canadian cities were just as ravaged by infectious diseases as the countries from which they migrated (Reitmanova et al. 2015). News reports claimed that immigrants avoided seeking medical help, therapy, and medical surveillance but paradoxically painted them as burdens who drained the Canadian healthcare system and abused health benefits, stealing resources that Canadians needed (Reitmanova et al. 2015). Immigrants were pronounced dead the moment they became immigrants.

After a newspaper declared Chinatown "a reeking mass of filth" in the 1890s, several Chinatown dwellings in Vancouver were destroyed and local Chinese immigrants

forcibly vaccinated (Reitmanova et al. 2015). That decade forward, Vancouver's Chinatown was "subjected to special sanitary interventions in the same manner as were sewerage, slaughterhouses, and pig ranches" (Reitmanova et al. 2015:474). Chinatown today is part of the city administration's violent efforts to "clean up" its streets by eradicating its ever-growing homeless encampments, which keep escalating as police and city employees forcibly remove tents and repeatedly displace homeless populations.

The consequences of US foreign policy and economic intervention in regions such as the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia continue to drive global migration as people seek economic opportunities which have diminished in their home countries due in no small part to damage wrought in the name of capitalist expansion (Fletcher 2020; Golash-Boza et al. 2019). Colonial processes of racialization and capitalist exploitation solidified distinct racial categories with materially enforced divisions that are still shaping the landscape of labour and migration. These divisions made way for a complex system of domination that is enacted through regimes of citizenship, nationhood, and labour exploitation, among other channels. The erosion of standard employment relationships and increasing demands for flexibility, low-cost hiring, and driving profits for capitalists created common entry points for foreign labour into exploitative sectors of work local Canadian and American white workers were unwilling to subject themselves to (Foster and Barnetson 2015). As Bonacich et al. (2008:348) assert,

> [t]he two most important features of racialized labor are the belief that these workers' lives are somehow less important—that they are less worthy of decent treatment and that they are denied basic citizenship rights so that they are, in a sense, excluded from the polity and can be exploited without having the political option to protect themselves.

Notions of (il)legitimacy, belonging, and exclusion inherent to racialization reinforce border regimes and controls surrounding citizenship and labour. In the discursive and ideological work of building nations, the land itself functions as both witness and accomplice to racial violence (Day 2016), as it is the site on which national and racial identity come to be formed. It is also how national and racial identities become naturalized—dually referring to 1) the enforcement of the idea that white settlers belong

to this land and vice versa, and 2) an alignment of the white settler population with idealized characteristics of the land itself (Day 2016). While Asian labour personified

> the abstract circuits of capitalism, settler colonial constructions of landscape express the opposite: the concrete, pure, and authentic noncapitalist dimension of nature… Chinese labor was associated with a perverse temporality, one that rendered Chinese bodies fungible (like currency) and a signifier of moral corruption. As such, Chinese bodies occupied the abstract dimension of the antinomy… White labor, on the other hand, was individual, tangible, concrete, and of social value. (Day 2016:76)

As Toshiya Ueno summarizes, the Orient "exists in so far as the West needs it, because it brings the project of the West into focus" (Roh et al. 2015).

The intrusion of Asian aliens and their association with perverse capitalist modernity fractures the settler-constructed romance of the Canadian landscape (Day 2016). The rise of landscape art in the twentieth century coincided with the rise of China's imperial power (and its threat to American and Canadian economic power) in a period of widespread anti-Asian immigration restriction as a measure to secure settler identification with the landscape (Park 2010; Day 2016). Artworks set forth a "reverence for and spiritual identification to land" and an "aestheticized 'defense' of national identity" (Day 2016:79) which worked alongside proliferating eugenic strategies of establishing settler belonging and the exclusion of those who do not belong. It was this "fundamental misperception of capitalism as an opposition between a concrete natural world and a destructively abstract, value-driven one that is personified as Asian" (Day 2016:16) that allowed colonial ideology to triangulate Indigenous, alien, and settler positions that justified colonial expansion.

In the last few decades, "Vancouver's identity as an Asian metropolis … has coincided with widespread resentment of wealthy Chinese investor-migrants, who are blamed for the city's skyrocketing property prices" (Day 2016:155). Since the 1990s, white settlers in the Vancouver region have acted on fears regarding the threat of immigrants intruding upon residential neighbourhoods and drastically changing the physical, racial, ethnic, and ideological makeup of these neighbourhoods and their way of life (Ray et al. 1997). Historical fears drawing causalities between Asian labour and

resource shortages— of money, time, health, labour, and land— situate Asian identity at the peculiar intersection "of race as a form of money, or vice versa" (Day 2016:3). In other words, the racial and the economic intersect to form the Asian immigrant subject.

Vancouver media problematized the increase of Asian residents and the distortion of suburban neighbourhoods by the intrusion of futuristic, postmodern monster homes onto traditionally neo-Tudor and English architectural styles that spoke to the culture of a white elite (Ray et al. 1997). As both the racial-ethnic composition and the physical landscapes of neighbourhoods shifted, popular stereotypes of wealthy Chinese immigrants buying up homes and leaving them empty flourished, despite the reality that Chinese individuals owned less than half of those properties and a majority of the Asian immigrants moving into the suburbs were far more economically marginalized than white settlers residing in the same areas (Ray et al. 1997).

Alongside the centripetal draw of immigration policy privileging "flexible Asian citizens with foreign capital," which aligns all Asian migrants with "destructively alien capital" (Day 2016:155), a centrifugal force shunts legally, economically, and socially precarious Asian migrants to the margins of society as a perennial threat to the social order even as they "remain indebted to the precarious structure of settler colonial hospitality" (Day 2016:155). With the face of capitalist modernity superimposed onto racialized labour, and whiteness mapped onto a landscape erased of Indigeneity (Day 2016), it becomes clear how under romantic anticapitalist thought, the "ruin is not only the physical imprint of the supernatural onto architecture, but also the possessed or deluded people wandering amidst the ruin who fail to see its ruinous aspect" and the "ghost-producing violence" the ruin signals (Tuck and Ree 2013:653).

The descriptor "Asian American" gestures to a geographic scope but also to a set of cultural markers. Differentiating between Asian American and Asian Canadian experiences would allow for comparisons of how national ideologies of multiculturalism and material coercions have developed alongside and contrast one another. But there is an Asian American experience that relates to the wider Asian diaspora scattered throughout Turtle Island, or what is known as North America. "Asian American" evokes a history of

colonial US and Canadian treatment of migrants, shared experiences of racialization, and social roles that are defined in relation to border regimes that were imposed on stolen land by settler colonizers who contributed to the same global conflicts and traumas that set migratory patterns into motion for a large portion if not most of its diasporic settler population.

The Asian diaspora in North America has been grouped and named in ways that are not always compatible. Especially when employed in liberal appeals to deference politics in institutions such as publishing and the arts, the umbrella of "Asian" as a label can cast a wide and clumsy net in certain contexts and resultantly obscure specificity of meaning, ultimately participating "in the weaponization of attention in the service of marginalization" (Táíwò 2022:71) such labels were originally meant to address. But the label also unifies experiences and interests shared by a wide range of people. It allows individuals to name their own identities and experiences, including those who responded to my recruiting calls for Asian immigrant writers and artists.

Taken from Main Street Bridge

Entering the thesis program three years ago, my curiosities concerned the mythologies surrounding, or forming, the immigrant subject and the conditions for its

marginalization. I was interested in studying precariousness but not by documenting it. I wanted to know more about how we tell stories about precarity — and how these stories come to inform the precarity experienced by immigrants in Canada. When I set out to interview participants for this project, I was still operating under a set of research questions which reflected that goal. But it became clear that my focus lay more with identity formation and meaning-making, and the questions I was asking at this early stage were not satisfying the curiosities I didn't yet know how to articulate within my disciplinary template. I was reading a lot and writing a lot about oppression and resistance but felt almost removed from this work as a global pandemic raged and I watched more oppressions and resistances flare and ebb cyclically.

Something changed when I turned my attention to literature and poetry. I realized that what I wanted to study was captured there, and that these texts were themselves subjects. The stories they told didn't just report on what was happening, what needs to change, and how to bring about change. They took the conditions of racialization and made something more of it, intangible as "it" may be. Many stories have been told to categorize our existence, but in these narratives and poetics I recognized processes by which Asian American or Asian Canadian identity was being—and has always been—rearticulated and given self-determined meaning. I oriented my research to primarily center these texts and knowledge from Asian diasporic cultural producers in Vancouver.

I don't mean to imply that studying oppression should fall to the wayside or that resistance does not yield change. We are familiar with stories of pioneers and progress, of modernity inscribing emptiness to occupied lands and turning them into industry and resource; we are also familiar with stories of ruin, lost livelihoods, and damaged landscapes when industry fails its promises (Tsing 2015). "If we end the story with decay … [we] turn our attention to other sites of promise and ruin, promise and ruin" (Tsing 2015:18), which trap us with the problems of living in ruination without recourse. As we have seen, revolution comes in momentous and incremental changes; my generation has long internalized the fact that we won't experience some kind of singularity that can reverse centuries of oppression, colonization, and violence dealt to people and to the land.

My work here questions how the people living in ruin make sense of their position within that ruin.

I argue that Asian diasporic cultural producers' intellectual and creative labour make it possible to negotiate collective identity distinct from national and ethnic identities of their old and new homes. These practices form affective connections between individuals in the diaspora, facilitating the ability to practice home-building, a sense of shared identity, and a sense of shared culture. Beyond literary and representational significance, Asian diasporic cultural production and intellectual labour contribute to our understanding of the Asian diaspora in North America as a community with a distinct cultural identity. Hage's (2010:419) theorization of home as a construct emphasizes that home "has to be a space open for opportunities and hope" where one can not only take shelter but actualize personal, social, and/or economic growth. Asian diasporic cultural production therefore is not merely representational of diasporic identity— rather, its transitive qualities open cultural identity and community to new possibilities.

In this thesis, I map out the intellectual labour that goes into making sense of identity for Asian diasporic writers using one focus group interview, six individual walking interviews (two of which were with participants who took part in the initial focus group), and literary texts which converse productively with the interview data. The question of the generalizability of ethnographic and qualitative research is even more imminent in the case of this study, which makes assumptions about Asian diasporic writers' engagements with North American institutions using the stories of a handful of creatives in Vancouver, BC. Vancouver is, on the surface, far from ruinous in aspect with its scenic waterfront and incessant greenery. But an advantage of this scenery is its ability to illuminate ruin in juxtaposition, from the impoverished margins of the city to geopolitical conflict and violence across the Pacific. Moreover, although our discussions sometimes involved the local literary community in Vancouver, the tropes and realities my participants reconcile with in both life and work are not specific to Vancouver. Outside theorists and writers referenced in the thesis help to show how my participants' insights are relevant to contemporary Asian Canadian and Asian American identity

formation at large. The data in this study draw from experiences and opinions of a tiny, finite sample which is by no means representative of Asian Canadian cultural producers broadly. But the findings of the study form a theory of how Asian diasporic subjects use language and storytelling to metabolize oppressive circumstances and confound boundaries of racial relations, making an argument that this skilled intellectual labour is crucial to Asian diasporic identity formation.

My calls for participants on social media were met with interest from a satisfactory number of storytellers—young, emerging creatives and established, prize-winning authors alike. However, it was challenging to schedule interviews, especially as I intended to hold focus group interviews in the first phase of my study. Synchronizing everyone's busy schedules in addition to my own commitments to multiple jobs proved difficult. Most potential participants who contacted me about their interest in the study fell off at the scheduling stage. The result was that I wound up with a smaller number of participants than I had anticipated. I viewed this as a limitation and wanted to interview more people and collect more data, as the thought of generating theory from what I perceived as a small pool of data intimidated me. But the richness of the existing data provided by participants I did interview eventually superseded that insecurity.

This thesis focuses mainly on writers and the language arts, but I do not limit cultural production and the intellectual labour that enables it to the written text. My recruitment materials called for writers, artists, and storytellers over the age of eighteen who identified as Asian and as first- or second-generation immigrants. I was interested in immediate conditions of displacement and how they shaped participants' understandings of their identity and work. Just one participant, James, was a third-generation Filipino American. Participants had varying levels of writing experience and many work with multiple storytelling and artistic mediums, including but not limited to comic art, tagging (graffiti), music, and animation. All participants are referred to with aliases. The focus group took place on Zoom and included three participants: James, Maxine, and Jane. Maxine and Jane went on to participate in individual walking interviews. Another four participants recruited after the focus group phase also did walking interviews—Allen, Louisa, Oscar, and Virginia.

I invited participants of walking interviews to choose a location and route that was either familiar to them or relevant to their creative work and sense of identity. Jane met me outside the London Drugs at Victoria and 41st Avenue and showed me around the residential neighbourhood she grew up in. Louisa met me in front of Science World, near her apartment, and we walked along the seawall in the direction of Olympic Village, then looped back around to our starting point. Maxine met me at the Olympic Village SkyTrain station and we travelled along the seawall, around Granville Island, and across the bridge until we made our way around to the Main Street-Science World area. Allen met me at English Bay Beach, where we enjoyed a long and sunny stroll along the Stanley Park seawall past Second Beach and back. Virginia and I met at Canada Place, and we walked along the harbour-facing seawall to the other side of the West End before she hurried back to the conference she was attending. Oscar met me in Gastown, also in the vicinity of his apartment, and we wandered to the corners of downtown Vancouver he frequents.

Taken on the Stanley Park seawall

My intention with walking interviews as a method was to acknowledge the physicality of displacement and to situate migrant identities in their relationship to place. Because Vancouver's identity is so rooted in its scenery—the mountains, the waterfront, the rainbow crosswalks—I hoped walking interviews would prime participants to think about their surroundings and sensory world in relation to their sense of belonging. Past writing on walking interviews indicates that the method could advance studies exploring links between identity, transitions, place, and community (Kinney 2017). Walking interviews are also known to provide insights into participants' relationships with others in the community, and their sense of alienation or loneliness (Kinney 2017:2), which are harder to get at in sit-down or remote interviews. I aimed for conversation to flow naturally in unstructured rhythm so that, even though I prepared a list of questions and

guiding interests, it gave my limited time with participants a more organic quality and allowed for more open-ended discussion. An advantage of walking interviews is that talking becomes easier while walking, and spontaneous conversation comes more naturally (Kinney 2017). I wanted the participants to be my guides in both a physical and analytical sense.

Photographs documenting my perspective of the walking interviews supplement the thesis by providing an additional dimension of sensory data that isn't just textual description. I brought my 35mm film camera along on all walking interviews except for Jane's, because my camera broke minutes before we met up. Some of the photos are black and white, which is not an artistic choice but a matter of me forgetting I had black and white film loaded. The decision to use photos was also motivated by recent shifts in the social sciences toward practices such as multimodality which disrupt "the centering of the textual in academia" (Welcome & Thomas quoted in Moretti 2021:246). Although the thesis remains mostly textual, it extracts meaning from aesthetic and poetic considerations. The text itself fulfills a meaningful role alongside other components such as photography, poetry, graffiti, and artistic expressions that center reflexivity "to challenge traditional boundaries and renegotiate the relationship between researcher and ethnographic subject" (Moretti 2021:246).

I consider the narrative form of this thesis another small gesture to multimodality. Stories are crucial to survival and relevant to social change in many ways— we've long used them to pass down life-sustaining knowledge. Stories also give us ways to make sense of our relationships with the world and each other, possibilities for the future, and how to cope with and resist political realities (Cameron 2012). Katherine McKittrick conceptualizes story as interventions into world-making, while Anna Tsing uses stories to inhabit the worlds of her ethnographic collaborators. Applications of storytelling in social scientific literature have gone through multiple phases including a "cultural turn" implicating story in the production of power and a "material and relational turn" renewing focus on the possibilities afforded by storytelling "as a mode of expressing non-representational, (post)-phenomenological geographies" (Cameron 2012:573). Stories can

be received as expressions of broader social and political contexts or they can challenge "the notion that story is wholly disciplined by power relations" (Cameron 2012:575).

A more recent strand in human geography concerns story as a means of "producing and expressing knowledges gleaned through embodied and intersubjective experience" (Cameron 2012:584) rather than as external research objects or a receptacle for external political contexts. Writing the thesis in this form was an extended opportunity for me to deepen entanglements by walking with my participants, their words, and theory. It diverges from the traditional structure to honour collaborative knowledges by telling stories about them. Instead of using detached sections to review past literature, elucidate methods, illustrate data, and discuss findings, the storytelling mode affords the ability to bring in referential material and theorize alongside outside influences. Rather than portray interview data in block quotes, I make an effort to portray it in literal conversation with one another. My hope with these interventions is to blur the boundaries between artistic labour and ethnographic work and ultimately testify to my claims that Asian diasporic cultural production contributes to knowledge of their own political realities while also extending the possibilities of language and identity formation.

In addition to social theory, I draw on literary concepts, texts, and criticism to support my arguments about the intellectual labour of making language out of identity. The concepts of legibility, haunting, and echoes play important parts in my analyses of participants' identity work, specifically in making sense of their identities in relation to their surroundings. I cite critics and writers such as Toni Morrison, Chen Chen, Audre Lorde, Ocean Vuong, and others alongside sociological material. In her book *Alien Capital*, Iyko Day (2016:8) exemplifies how Asian North American literature and cultural production represent a "genealogy of settler colonialism" that aligns Asians with the unseen and unrepresentable abstract processes of capitalist relations (in opposition to a perceived concrete, natural dimension of labour). Day undergirds her arguments with studies of performance art, historical artefacts, and fictional works. Along with stories that come together through participant data, external stories reinforce this thesis: *How Much of These Hills is Gold*, a novel by C Pam Zhang; *Everything Everywhere All at*

Once, a film directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert; and *Time is a Mother*, a poetry collection by Ocean Vuong, just to name a few.

How Much of These Hills is Gold is C Pam Zhang's 2019 debut, a historical novel about a Chinese American family and their lives at the end of the gold rush. It deals with placelessness, haunting, and links between family, land, and memory. Among other themes, the novel questions how lived experiences become textual history, how history becomes artefact, and who adjudicates, records, and legitimizes this history. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* premiered in 2022 and follows a Chinese immigrant mother and laundromat owner who finds herself at the center of plot to prevent the destruction of the multiverse. The movie attends to her difficult relationships with her family and her struggles with translating cultural identity across different worlds. *Time is a Mother* is Ocean Vuong's 2022 poetry collection, following after a 2018 novel and his first poetry collection from 2016. Written in the "aftershocks" of his mother's death, *Time is a Mother* furthers themes of grief, violence, and alterity Vuong's work is known for.

As *Everything Everywhere All at Once* indicates with its absurdist worldbuilding, migrant identity is forged in a contrapuntal relationship with time and space. In the first chapter, I expound on this temporal and spatial precariousness by asking how interlinked processes of memory, sensory interpretation, and haunting augment Asian diasporic writing. This chapter treats the senses as interscalar and spatiotemporal transit, reflects on how participants make sense of place and displacement in relation to their creative work, and puts interview data in conversation with broader disciplinary interventions into memory and migration.

The next chapter wonders at the role of institutional illegibility in shaping Asian diasporic identity, and how writers understand their own legibility relative to dominant groups. Their identities, experiences, and output are legible or illegible to others depending on where they are, who they're interacting with, and their own choices. I explore how participants navigate their (il)legibility in different contexts, including creative and intellectual institutions. The chapter draws connections between storytelling, identity, and community to probe into the ways in which storytelling, and participants'

engagements with cultural identity, is crucial to the communal aspects of identity-making.

The final chapter explores how Asian diasporic writers understand storytelling as a way to disobey racial and linguistic boundaries. Their agency in negotiating their own legibility depends on a knowledge of how power works in the institutions and social worlds they move through. This chapter parses through how participants and other cultural producers treat their own Asian diasporic identities in institutions where they have to carry out the interpretive labour of making themselves and their work legible to others. David Graeber (2012) used "interpretive labour" to describe a process by which the powerful, or those who hold more power in a given interaction or wider context, leave the work of empathizing to the powerless or the less powerful in the configuration. I extend the concept of interpretive labour as a way to make sense of participants' resistance to (il)legibility and power dynamics in intellectual institutions.

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Chapter 1. Ghosts of the Seawall: Memory, Migration, & the Senses

> *Because, no matter how "fictional" the account of these writers, or how much it was a product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory. You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place.*
>
> Toni Morrison (1995:99)

Sensations of both spatial and temporal disorientation are inherent to migration. The route from Asia to the western coast of Canada or the US usually requires traversing the Pacific Ocean and crossing constructed borders of space and time. Part of migration is the being displaced, but part of it is also the landing from flight, unpacking, arranging, tucking old sheets over new beds, distributing yourself into new rooms, cooking family dishes in a strange kitchen, letting the aroma and essence of the food billow into an atmosphere unfamiliar in its temperature, smell, and texture (Ahmed 2006). The senses myelinate the processes of both remembering and forgetting— which in turn play their role in feelings of displacement, (un)familiarity. The memory of migration complicates our understanding and experience of moving through time and space (Hage 2010).

Hauntings ostensibly affect places, but it is a process that emerges through living memory. As well as being a particularly challenging place to make a new home, find affordable housing, and access transportation (Moretti 2021), Vancouver is "a place haunted by an unjust past of dispossession and displacement, an unequal present of marginality and disconnection, and an uncertain future of recognition and reclamation" in which Indigeneity is rendered both spectacle and spectral to sustain colonial logics (Baloy 2016:210). Memory is intricately tied to place and physical space. This cityscape,

bound up in a triangular relationship between settler, native, and immigrant (Day 2016), underscores the importance of confronting how the presence of immigrant settlers and the histories they bring with them continue to shape the mythology of Vancouver. In this chapter, young Asian diasporic writers and artists trace the language of motion and displacement with storytelling, showing how the process of making sense of themselves requires them to draw from sensate memory and experience. I draw on fictional narratives and interview data to make a claim for how cultural producers access Asian diasporic identity in displacement through interactions between language, memory, and the senses.

Considerations of haunting and of echoes inform my understanding of this process by showing how memory emerges through accessing links between history, lived experience, and the self. This transitive access upsets boundaries of space and time, for example by contesting the fixity of borderlines, national imaginaries, and the idea of memory as static artifact rather than as active production and maintenance of knowledge. Moretti (2021:301) uses "echoes" to speak to the fluid and mutable nature of memory and attend to affective resonances felt "between places, people, ideas, or social worlds." Echoes show us how meaning is formed in correspondence between past and present, disrupting linear and static configurations of memory in which it is thought to be unchanging over time and instead demonstrating how memory emerges processually (Moretti 2021).

The idea of echoes reverberating construes memory as a part of (or emerging within) space — or images of what once stood within space. Embodying the connection between memory, storytelling, experience, and identity in her writing practice, Toni Morrison describes the imaginative act of depending on others' recollections as well as her own history to write about the interior lives of slaves as

> a kind of literary archeology: On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image - on the remains - in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. By 'image,'

> of course, I don't mean 'symbol'; I simply mean 'picture' and the feelings that accompany the picture. (1995:92)

Morrison describes figures from the past as a way to access herself and her own interior life. She uses a neologism, "rememory," in the novel *Beloved* to detail the process of remembering a memory — the remembering of a remembering. The character Sethe explains rememory to another character, Denver:

> "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place — the picture of it — stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think about it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there." (Morrison 1987).

The traumas of slavery do not consist of just remembered events of the past for Sethe — they remain just as present in her world as the scars on her back (Kirschenbaum 2021). They become "something repeated [in] another voice and at another time, leaving [her] to contemplate what is not present" (Moretti 2021:306) like echoes.

Rememory is invoked in the novel *How Much of These Hills is Gold* by C Pam Zhang, which opens with patriarch Ba's death in the year '62 (in the novel, XX62). From that point on the details of each family member's story are revealed always in hindsight, as burdens of memory long held onto and finally released— not unlike the pieces of Ba's corpse falling from the trunk containing it as it rots. While siblings Lucy and Sam travel eastward seeking to lay Ba to rest, Lucy secretly buries those decomposing pieces of his body in shallow mounds, reproducing the way memory— in its ruptures of time, language, place, history, materiality, and experience— creates meaning from the embodied world (Moretti 2021). Ba and Lucy use the word "rememory" several times in their narration.

The last instance comes when a section told from the perspective of dead Ba finally recounts a story neither of the siblings' parents could tell when they were alive — the story of how Ba and Ma set fire to and accidentally killed a camp of two hundred Chinese railroad workers in their attempt to free them. Ba reflects: "Got no flesh and rightly I shouldn't hurt, but rememory hurts me" (Zhang 2020:214). Half-alive and half-dead, the family's journey rehearses Moretti's (2021:312) description of memory as

grasping “ephemeral reflections in a moving landscape” and highlights that it is a process that transverses distance and space. Even though Ba is no longer animate in his body, and even though that body is literally disintegrating across the country into the land he so strived to lay claim to in life, rememory causes him pain. Morrison’s and Zhang’s use of rememory grapple with carrying the burden of violence and injustices already occurred at scales far larger than the individuals narratively tasked with them.

Jane, a poet, writer, and university student who was born in Canada, related to the commonly articulated struggle of emotionally connecting with parents and grandparents as immigrant children. Her paternal grandparents and her parents had arrived from Macau and settled in Vancouver in the 1990s. The rest of her family — her maternal grandparents and all her cousins — still live in Macau, where she would fly back to visit about once a year before the COVID-19 pandemic. Jane and I walked from our meeting spot at the noisy intersection of Victoria and 41st Avenue into the quiet residential streets of the neighbourhood she grew up in, past Killarney Community Centre and the high school beside it.

“They don’t like talking about their own lives,” Jane said. “I remember asking my Po Po [about her past] once, and she just kind of said, ‘Oh, there’s nothing to know about it.’ Then she started getting teary-eyed. I think the past is hard for them to… because it wasn’t a happy childhood. My dad mentioned my grandma was a child when the [Second Sino-Japanese War] happened, when Japan invaded China. Walking every few feet, there were corpses lying around. My Po Po was still living in the village in China at the time, so when they invaded, the people had to go to the mountains to hide. The girls had to rub their faces with dirt so they wouldn’t get raped. My Po Po knew of someone who saw someone else get tortured, how they drowned them and filled their stomach with water, then put this wooden board on the person’s stomach and started slamming it on them like a seesaw.”

We were far removed from times of war in the suburban neighbourhood Jane knew as home, filled with greenery and so quiet that the brisk wind was the loudest thing for blocks. Frankie Huang (2023), reflecting on the familiar theme of generational

tensions within immigrant families in the movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, points out that "a flight between Hong Kong and Los Angeles is just 13 hours long. But the journey, for an immigrant family, can lead to the kind of transformation that renders us unrecognizable to those we leave behind."

Directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) is an independent film that centers Evelyn Wong, a middle-aged Chinese immigrant, and her increasingly distant and fraught relationships with her gay daughter Joy, her disapproving father, and her husband Waymond who runs a laundromat with Evelyn and who Evelyn is trying to divorce. These conflicts visiblize tensions that tend to portray women in her position in a less than flattering light—the conservative, homophobic Chinese mom, for example. Evelyn's ongoing conflict with the IRS is the other major source of conflict in the film. This tension gives voice to the crushing sense of disempowerment associated with navigating American bureaucracy with a dysfunctional habitus, a Bordieuan concept which Hage (2010:417) defines as "a habitus that finds itself unable to strategize and improvise in the face of a radical newness." In other words, the cultural literacy and English language skills required to navigate American social worlds and institutions erects barriers that Evelyn repeatedly rebounds off when she tries to enter them. As a result she is disillusioned and embittered by American culture, which she views as having stolen her daughter. An alternate version of Waymond explains that every choice they make creates parallel universes. Multiple alter egos of Joy and Waymond and even Deirdre, the IRS agent Evelyn deals with, from alternate realities accost Evelyn as she tries to refuse participating in their efforts to save the multiverse.

Huang makes the claim that the film's maximalist multiverse portrays a version of reality that explains how "the transformation of immigration" causes us to become fractal versions of ourselves. Learning to live in a new country inevitably disorients a person's identity, cultural vocabulary, and the way they relate to others in their lives. These different versions of the self render us scrutable to some people and contexts, and inscrutable to others, including the ones we love:

> Even without traversing the multiverse, as immigrants, we become different versions of our former selves, whether we know it or not. Immigration is more than moving to a new place, but a metamorphosis we undergo, like shifting into a version of ourselves from another universe. (Huang 2023)

It is worth noting that in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, Evelyn Wang talks to her father in Cantonese but to her husband Waymond in Mandarin; with her daughter Joy, she speaks a mix of Mandarin and English while Joy responds in English and some broken Mandarin. From finding the words to express ideas clearly to one another, to dealing with American bureaucracy at the IRS, differences in language and cultural upbringing divide the characters and keep them from understanding each other.

It could be said that the film garnered so much positive attention from diasporic Asians (queer ones especially) because they found a space of recognition within its representations of experiences common to Asian immigrant life. It is common to hear that we find "spaces" opened psychically in literature, stories, and poetry where we can dwell when there is no "space" for us in the physical world. Katherine McKittrick draws on criticisms of spatial and geographic metaphors used in Black studies and social theory, often

> without attending to the politics that underwrite these terms … [which] emerge from and embrace colonial feelings, reifies the absoluteness of space, and naturalizes uneven social geographies and their attendant social inequalities… This kind of outlook removes social actors from the production of space and other infrastructures (McKittrick 2021:10).

What does it mean, politically, to see yourself "represented" or to be given "space" in literature, stories, and other media? McKittrick's critique comes out of the specific context of Black geography, but the questions prompted by her ideas seem useful to think about in terms of migration and how race is produced through the violence of social relations at each stage of migration — relations which are marked by what David Graeber (2012) calls "areas of violent simplification." The metaphors, ideas, and concepts we think with reify and validate material conditions. Throughout the thesis, I invoke spatial metaphors as a way of speaking to the vertigo of motion and displacement in migrant life. Inspired by McKittrick's incitements, I aim not to shy away from well-worn metaphors and the ideas they sprout from or reify—assuming a sense of progress toward

unproblematic ways of knowing— and instead move with them to better understand their nuances.

Saidiya Hartman (2008:13) describes how her paternal grandparents left Curaçao, an island in the Caribbean, for New York with a plan to return home when they were better off financially— but "as the decades passed, they convinced themselves that it was still too soon, or that the money wasn't right yet, or that it would be easier to leave the following year." Hartman references a myth of opportunity which is also engaged by the conflict between Lucy and Ba in *How Much of These Hills is Gold*— characterized by refusal to admit defeat, holding instead to beliefs that reminded one of why they were in America and mythologies that reinforced their presence there. The only difference was that where Hartman's grandparents refused to leave New York, Ba refused to stop moving from prospecting site to prospecting site in pursuit of a fetishized notion of opportunity. Hartman recalls her grandparents' intonation of the word "opportunity" as if

> it was the consolation they required, as if it repelled prejudice, warded off failure, remedied isolation, and quieted the ache of yearning. It shrouded the past and set their gaze solely on the future. The money sent home didn't assuage the anger of mothers nursing abandonment or teenage children anticipating a life in the States they would never have. Nostalgia or regret could kill you in a place like America, so they banked only on tomorrow. … When it became clear that they would never return home, my grandparents erected a wall of half-truths and silence between themselves and the past. *They parceled time, lopping off the past as if it were an extra appendage, as if they could dispose of the feelings connecting them to the world before this one*… In time, they decided the present was all they could bear. They died in the States with their green cards as the only proof that they had once belonged elsewhere" (Hartman 2008:14-15) [italics added].

The relationship between here and there, forgetting and remembrance, and displacement and emplacement is one wherein each relies on the other to exist. Hartman (2008:16) reflects that when she set out to trace and find the border dividing stranger from kin along the route of the Atlantic slave trade, her training as a graduate student had done little to prepare her for telling "the stories of those who had left no record of their lives and whose biography consisted of the terrible things said about them or done to them. I was determined to fill in the blank spaces of the historical record and to represent the lives of those deemed unworthy of remembering, but how does one write a story

about an encounter with nothing?" Moretti (2021) points out how memory "is intertwined with moments of forgetting" (303) and how "in this forgetting … a space is made for remembering" (309). The only way to measure an absence is by measuring the material of the world around that absence. Memory and sensorium exist in counterpoint, and as the displacement stretches the distance of this relationship, forming a sense of identity can feel as remote and inaccessible as a nation.

Maxine expressed how even in the case of voluntary travel, uprooting and living country to country fundamentally shaped how she understood her identity in relation to the world around her. Born in the Philippines, Maxine first stayed in Beijing, China for a couple of years when she was three; moved to London, UK until she was twelve; started high school back in the Philippines; moved to Ottawa at fifteen; then landed in Vancouver at seventeen, where she later attended college and graduate school.

"Growing up, I would know that we would leave eventually," Maxine said of her childhood and adolescence spent in transit with her father, who worked for the Foreign Service of the Philippines. "When I was smaller, it didn't matter as much to me because I wasn't as aware of it. I just knew that it made me really sad when we did leave again. But I think around when I was a teenager I started realizing, is there a point to having close relationships when you're going to move eventually? I still did have some close relationships, but I realized I keep myself at a distance from even the people that I really love because of that [inevitability]. It's made me see relationships with people and with places as temporary. Even though I've lived in Vancouver for a very long time now—about seven or eight years— I still feel like I'm not really from here."

Taken on Granville Island

As we ambled under bridges toward Granville Island on a dewy May evening, Maxine told me she regularly takes walks on the seawall with a notebook and that she does a lot of her writing on these walks. "[Vancouver's] proximity to water influences a lot of my poetry. A lot of my poems recently have been about water. I think that's due to how I like walking along the seawall, seeing False Creek, and going to the beaches— like Kits or English Bay. That's what I do to destress. Actually they're some of the only chances that I get to write."

When I asked participants to choose our meeting spots and routes for walking interviews, almost all of them wanted to walk the seawall. Settler identity in Canada is strongly anchored in discursive and aesthetic associations that align Canadian cultural identity with its landscapes. Vancouver's seawall and beaches are an essential part of its iconography as a city, as well as a popular site for residents and tourists alike to enjoy good weather or engage in activities like running and biking. Each participant and I met at different starting points, but my memory of conversations on the seawall wound up blurring over one another and bleeding into each other. Wind skimming the surface of the water and curling around our ankles made spring walks chillier and summer walks more

bearable. Several participants provided reasons when they wrote me back to suggest meeting spots, but most of them explained over the course of our walks, gesturing to locales of significance or familiarity and telling me stories they associated with these places.

Taken from the Stanley Park seawall

"I often write about water as something that I don't understand." Maxine told me she was working on composing a chapbook manuscript using all the poems she'd written on the subject of water. She described a memory of walking around Stanley Park and staring out over the Georgia Strait, the stretch of water between mainland BC and Vancouver Island, and spoke on getting caught up in looking at the water and thinking about its vastness. "It's obviously not as large as other bodies of water, but I was just so taken with how much I can't comprehend [how much water there is]. Water often represents that [incomprehension], because it brings a lot of uncertainty.

"Water is also a medium of movement. I think about my grandfather, for example, who is a retired seafarer—water for him meant spending so much time on the sea, going places like Africa and Australia, so many days in a boat with other men just travelling.

My mom told me that when I was newly born, they were driving in the northern parts of the Philippines, and there was a beach by the roadside that they often go to. My grandpa dipped me in the water, and apparently I started swimming.

"I kind of hold on to water also as a typical diasporic trope of, like, oceans as connections. I cringe at [that metaphor] a little bit now, but I think it still resonates with me. Especially when Vancouver is on the Pacific Ocean, [facing] toward Asia. It's very much a literal connection. The life I currently live is made possible by my dad and my grandfather who just wanted to see what was beyond. Because, obviously, I'd be a very different person if I was stuck in the Philippines and grew up there. And so just coming from people who wanted to see what literally lay beyond the shore, I think was super influential for me."

Maxine's anecdotes position this "medium" of water as a way for her to access poetic thought and creation, as the metaphor anchoring abstract feelings of uncertainty in her writing, and as an avenue through which to make sense of her place in the geography of diaspora and her orientation in relation to her kin.

"One thing I've noticed that I keep coming back to [in my poetry] is being transient and temporary and moving around a lot," Maxine said. "And every time I think this I'm always surprised that I keep coming back to it. Because I thought, and still think, that I've moved on from processing it or that I don't need to think about it anymore. But one of my friends who's also a poet told me this: if you keep coming back to it in your poems, that means it is important to you still. There's no shame in coming back to something that you thought maybe you've already moved on from. So I still very much linger on this topic and process it through my poetry." We compared this repetitive returning to the emotions and themes in writing to the waves and ripples in a body of water, each of which mimics what came before, coming from the same source, yet constitutes its own discrete movement.

Ocean Vuong responds to this sentiment by claiming that "our themes are inexhaustible, and our work is to keep building architectures for these obsessions"

(Washington & Vuong n.d.). Chinese American poet Chen Chen echoed Maxine's meditations on her process in his poem, "Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls:"

> I'm remembering what a writer friend once said to me, All you write about / is being gay or Chinese— how I can't get over that, & wonder if it's true, / if everything I write is in some way an immigrant narrative or another / coming out story. I recall a recent poem, featuring fishmongers in Seattle, / & that makes me happy—clearly that one isn't about being gay or Chinese. / But then I remember a significant number of Chinese immigrants / live in Seattle & how I found several of the Pike Place fishmongers / attractive when I visited, so I guess that poem's about being gay / & Chinese, too. (Chen 2017:83)

Chen's poem reveals how his creative preoccupation with being gay and Chinese emerges from repetition and noticing.

Moretti describes a moment during a walking interview in which her informant tells her about the flowers of his home country while they look at all the spring blooms lining the Canadian sidewalk:

> There are so many flowers in Canada, he tells me… but they do not smell like anything. In my country we have very few flowers, but their scent is so strong and wonderful. So, seeing flowers here reminds me of my home country. B. looks at the flowers but does not bend towards them; he does not pick them to attend to their too-faint smell. The way we stand together on the sidewalk, on this grey rainy day, the spring blooms made only of sight, underscores the irreducible distance to other flowers and other olfactory worlds. Here, sight and smell generate a diffuse, shifting composition in the ways they call upon each other. Listening to his words, I think of an echo: something repeated but in another voice and at another time, leaving us to contemplate what is not present. (2021:306)

Moving through space, these absences yawn open to allow for the resonance of echoes—a call toward the not-present, or an answer with no shape, orienting us to the questions at the source.

Maxine reflected on how she first connected with Filipino poetry in another country absent of cultural familiarity. "It was in high school [in Vancouver] that I discovered poetry through Filipino spoken word videos. That was one of my first encounters with poetry. Actually, a lot of the things I've discovered, [I discovered them

away] from the Philippines. Listening to Tagalog— and English and other languages— there's so much emotion that can be put into the words, the amount of meaning that can be encapsulated in a line and in the way it's said. It's still so powerful for me, how poets are about to do that. And hearing my language like that, how lyrical it is, was really powerful for me too."

Diasporic nostalgia may have traditionally been associated in migration studies with homesickness or a "seeking of an imaginary homely past as a hiding place from the present time and space" (Hage 2010:420), but Hage opposes this conceptualization of migrant nostalgia as generally depressive. Instead, he proposes that a large part of migrants' nostalgia for the past has more to do with home-building and settlement efforts in the here and now than with desires to escape from the present (Hage 2010). Building a home in an affective sense, Hage argues, crucially involves a feeling of community and belonging. When migrants yearn for that communality, "one's understanding of such a life is guided by the kind of communal feelings one remembers having had… This is why this yearning for homely communality translates into an attempt to build the past conditions of its production" (Hage 2010:420).

That is, when a sensory encounter with an object evokes in someone a nostalgic yearning for past experiences of home, it also evokes for them the positive affects associated with past homely feelings, imbuing the sensory present with meaning that it previously did not hold (Hage 2010). Like echoes, this nostalgia opens rifts for migrants to pull "the past 'home' of another time and another space" (Hage 2010:422) into their present imaginaries. It simulates temporal and spatial transit, like "verse jumping" between alternate realities in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Eventually, as migrants' time in a new place elapses and they have been able to engage in home-building, homesickness decreases (Hage 2010). For Maxine, discovering Tagalog poetry away from the Philippines gave her a way to connect a past home to her new home and new surroundings.

"Before COVID, I would go back [to the Philippines] every summer," Maxine said. "But recently I have not. And it's given me pause to think, this is probably how a lot

of second-gen Filipino Canadians also feel. Those who grew up here, in an increasing sense of disconnection from the Philippines— even though you might have been born there, or your parents talk about it often. It's both really interesting for me to watch myself think about it, but also very sad to feel that increasing sense of distance."

Even when she visited another city, Maxine's memory and creative habitus led her to recognize regional differences in poetic practices that contribute to her understanding of her belonging in Vancouver relative to San Francisco. "A lot of the poets I read are based here in Vancouver, so I think one particular form of poetry that I've gotten used to is very much embedded in the city. And because I read so much of it, I also [do the same things these poets do in their work]. This [became] apparent to me when I went to San Francisco and picked up a book of poetry. The poetry was so different [that I got a] perspective of how distinct the poetry scene is here. It's good not to be here for a little bit, to have some distance from time to time."

Taken at English Bay Beach

"Being away from Vancouver helps me love it a little bit more," Maxine continued. "I feel like I'd be [living] here for the next couple of years, but I do see myself wanting to move in the future. It's funny — even though I kind of have the stability that I've wanted growing up, I don't like that I'm still in the same place. It's a little bit strange to me, because being here for a long amount of time, I guess kind of like living with your parents, you get annoyed with it."

Oscar, a poet and multimedia artist from Kolkata, India who moved from Edmonton to Vancouver in 2018, remarked on how the distance from his new home to the one he left behind transformed his connections with family and people back in Kolkata. "You feel like an outsider in your own culture, because you move and you've lost your sense of place. It's lost memory. We're a culture of amnesia— you forget where you come from. I go back [to Kolkata] and I have no idea how many people have passed away due to COVID. I asked my mom, 'Oh, how's [so-and-so] doing?' And my mom's like, 'She died a year ago.'"

Oscar led me on a walk that brought us up the loop of Main Street Bridge. The view of the city, with the brown tangle of railroad tracks leading to CRAB Park on one side and the white sails of Canada Place on the other side, acted as the backdrop for Oscar's contemplation of his desire to move to Vancouver.

"Maybe it's my background in Indian mythology…but I was thinking about the laws of manifestation. Growing up, I always wanted to come to the city, like New York or Vancouver… But I wasn't sure what I'd do after. My focus was just on getting there. So now that I'm here, every night, I look at the skyline." He referred to the view from the window of his second-floor apartment in Gastown, just below where we stood on the bridge. "And I'm like, 'Well, I'm here. But I don't know what to do.'"

Oscar explained their proposal for an art gallery exhibition involving a comparison of pictures from their homeland to pictures of springtime in Vancouver, and one involving the parallel journeys of his flight to Canada and the Japanese steamship, Komagata Maru. He wanted to learn from the "patterns that emerge from this juxtaposition of [his] two identities" as Indian and Asian Canadian. "I recently learned

about [the Komagata Maru] maybe, like, five or six months ago. It started from Calcutta and ended up in Vancouver; so when I was looking at my plane routes, I followed an identical journey to the Komagata Maru. The only difference was that I was let in." The voyage across the ocean, and the creative labour of superimposing the ship's journey over his own, became a point of reference for Oscar's sense of ethnic identity. Notably, his artistic vision attempts to bridge the identity he once held as Indian and the identity he now finds himself inhabiting as Asian Canadian.

Taken on Main Street Bridge

Oscar's stories describe how as a newcomer, he walked and placed himself in Vancouver's geography and history as his identity was being reshaped by lived experiences in a completely new and unknown context. On the Main Street Bridge, Oscar pointed out the vermillion plaque behind one of two granite Chinese lions gifted to the City of Vancouver from the Shanghai Port Authority in 1995, which flank the curved

road on the bridge and open their jaws to oncoming cars. The plaque hangs on the side of the bridge which overlooks the railroad tracks and towers of shipping containers.

"[I walk this way all the time]," Oscar told me. "I recently watched this short documentary by Sara Wylie called *A Radiant Sphere*. It's about her [long-lost] great uncle, [Joe Wallace], who was a poet and a part of the Canadian Communist Party, way back in the 1950s." During his lifetime and after his death, Wallace's writing and political activism made him likely the best known Canadian poet in Eastern Europe and China. "[Wylie's film] has a lot of shots exactly here. She touched on the fact that this was also the grounds for this communist movement, which is written right here." We looked at the plaque memorializing and summarizing the On-to-Ottawa Trek. In 1935, BC strikers rode on top of railcars from Vancouver to Ottawa. When negotiations in Ottawa went nowhere, they turned back. A rally in Regina turned into a violent riot with hundreds of injuries and two deaths, including one of a city constable, when police and RCMP moved to arrest speakers.

As Oscar and I turned back and descended from Main Street Bridge, we took to alleys. "This area also has a lot of graffiti." They pulled a can of spray paint from their bag and offered me a turn with it, but I declined. "I do it, like, every night. I mean, it's kind of sketchy. I try to use words because I'm not a good tagger in the sense of design, but I do learn from it. I started maybe five months ago. In the beginning, I used to do it by myself at night. And the darker it gets, like two a.m., three a.m., you actually see communities of taggers— they walk together and they keep tagging. And then the next morning, you see the tags." Like Maxine, Oscar was influenced by the art practices of communities in Vancouver he associated with.

Taken in Gastown

"Chinatown is one of the places I tag. Wendy Poole Park, I don't tag as much anymore because there's a lot of encampments now [for houseless folks], so I don't want to, you know, intrude, but that was the place I started. And it does get painted over, so I don't think you'd see it [now]. But if you do see something like 'Please Love Me'—" he painted the words *PLS KEEP ME ALIVE* in silver— "you know it's me." Tagging performatively and affectively establishes Oscar's spatial belonging in his new home.

They pointed out splotches on the concrete wall where the grey was lighter than the rest. "As you can see, they get painted over every other week. It's like a battle— they paint it over and we'll come back and do it again. It takes away this insecurity I have,

because I can't [paint] as well as that—" they referred to the graffiti art which injected colour into many streets in Vancouver— "but I can write something that might make sense to someone." Even though this symbolic belonging gets painted over and erased repeatedly, Oscar and other taggers come back to do it all over again the following night. The presumptive need to re-establish and reinforce this symbol testifies to the nature of diasporic identity work in that it emerges in counterpoint to dominant narratives which reject the presence of those existing in contradiction with the settler state's identity.

Taken in Gastown

As Sara Ahmed (2017:47) writes, "a little sideways movement can open up new worlds." My participants draw our awareness to place and how it makes language of us—makes us legible, crosses us out, changes what we know of ourselves and how. Hage suggests that

> migrant memories articulate the relation between space and time in a unique way. It is well known that many migrants imagine their homeland to have remained exactly as they remember it being the day they left: to them, the past still exists in the present, but elsewhere. This "presently existing space of the past" skirts and sometimes even infiltrates everyday experiences as a "spatial haunting" specific to the diasporic condition. Diasporic memory, then, is more than something produced in the specific practice of

> remembering: it is a permanent spatial accompaniment to all experiences of the present. (2010:427)

Participants struggled to translate ideas between disciplines, memories across generations, and belonging over oceans, but in doing so they make wavelike movements toward an interspatial diasporic identity rooted in diasporic memory practices.

Moments of being thrown off course, according to Ahmed (2017:47), "can be traumatic, registered as the loss of a desired future, one that you are grasping for, leaning toward. Maybe we realize: it would have been possible to live one's life in another way. We can mourn because we didn't even realize that we gave something up." But they can inversely be "experienced as a gift, as opening up a possibility." The following two chapters show how my participants, and Asian diasporic writers broadly, actualize the creative and intellectual possibilities informed by their life circumstances, in the process facilitating identity formation and a sense of community.

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Chapter 2. "What Stories Tell Stories:" Legibility, Representation, & Identity

> *We also have an increasing tendency to identify what's interesting with what's important, and to assume places of density are also places of power.*
>
> David Graeber (2012:111)

Focus group participant James interpreted the role of authenticity in his art with a story about tinola, a Filipino soup dish his grandmother would prepare. James was born in California and now lives in Vancouver, but his maternal grandparents were the first on the Filipino side of his family to immigrate to the US. His grandfather had been born in the Philippines and moved to the US with his family as a small child, eventually joining the US military. During the Second World War, James' grandfather was sent with US troops to the Philippines, where he met James' grandmother. After the war, they got married and moved to California.

James, an animation student, explained that "it is kind of a tricky line" to walk between representing culture and humanizing subjects versus being so "heavy-handed" in your representation that it "becomes almost stereotypical. It does mostly depend on who's creating it," he elaborated. "It is kind of hard to judge when there's so many different kinds of experience. I can't really think of an example in media, but I know when it comes to food… My grandma would make a type of soup called tinola. She'd make a very Americanized version. She'd use vegetables and other [ingredients] that you would find in any American grocery store. When I look up authentic recipes online to try to make [tinola], they probably are more authentic [than my grandmother's recipe], because they're using ingredients you'd be able to find in the Philippines.

"But none of them are the type of tinola she would make. Maybe these recipes are more authentic to 'the Filipino experience.' But, you know, my grandma definitely wasn't the only one who immigrated [from] the Philippines and didn't have a lot of

money and had to improvise with these recipes. So yeah, maybe if I made [tinola] with okra instead of spinach [like the online recipes]…I think if I did that, it would be authentic to the Philippines. But I don't know how authentic that is to the Filipino American experience, when it's also so tied to poverty and using what you have."

James' story sparked my interest in the use of food as analogy for storytelling. Home foods for migrants provide the basic security of nutrition, a route to familiarity in the unknown of displacement, and practices of communality (Hage 2010). Deprivation of familiar produce and ingredients, leading to the emergence of "creative practices of [culinary] substitution," is common to many early migration histories (Hage 2010:423). I was additionally reminded of the concept of communion in literary analysis, how in literature the act of eating and sharing a meal can change relationships between characters and communities as well as speak to ideas surrounding consumption and culture. Food could be a metaphor for art and stories feeding collective identity. I shelved this notion for the time being and almost forgot about it as I started recruiting for and scheduling individual walking interviews. Then, during these interviews, I asked participants about their personal relationships with and approaches to storytelling. Some of them reached for food metaphors without my prompting.

Just as a truck roared past us at the entrance to Granville Island, I asked Maxine what storytelling means to her. She waited until after the truck drove away, covering her lapel mic, to answer. "In all cultures—maybe I'm overgeneralizing—storytelling is how we form connections to one another and share space with each other and gather. Like dinners, where you have food, but we also tell each other about some recent gossip that we've heard or something that's maybe pissing us off at the moment or something happy that happened recently." She laughed. "It feels like through food, and through that storytelling, this is how we build relationships with each other and continue to make them stronger. And I think individually, it also helps us articulate what we experience and feel, to ourselves and to other people. Because I feel like sometimes, writing a poem is a way for me to take something that I've been thinking about and put it aside for the moment, and allow me to look at it from not an objective point of view, but a distance[d] point of view." Just as food is a way to practice communality in the diaspora, storytelling

according to Maxine is a way to gather people affectively and physically which allows them to build collective identity.

Oscar responded to the same question also using food to flesh out his claim. It was toward the end of our walk. Oscar had to return to his apartment in Gastown and I had to catch my bus at Main and Hastings, so we walked the border between Chinatown and Strathcona. Tents and the belongings of unhoused people squeezed the sidewalk into a narrow path we had to awkwardly shuffle into single file to get by. We passed the Keefer Street location of Kent's Kitchen, which Oscar pointed out had served hot, cheap meals as a mainstay of the community for over forty years. In April 2023, nearly a year after our interview, the Keefer Street location closed permanently due to rent increases.

"To me, [storytelling is] an embodiment of my identity, my culture, stuff that has been passed down [to me] through [others'] bodies, but not necessarily consciously," Oscar said. "I come here, and I cook dishes that I saw my mother cooking. But she didn't really formally teach me, so I [found out how to cook them] through YouTube. I figured it out on my own. It's that cooking that keeps being passed down from generation to generation. The way I frame it…is the fact that the story is not as important as the telling of it."

Taken in Strathcona

In Oscar's framing, the content was less important than the tradition of communication, oral and otherwise, which he said preserves culture. At the time of the interview, I had been grappling with my own criticisms of consumption as a metaphor. Contemporary colloquial discourses surrounding the things we read, watch, and listen to often frame the act as "consuming media." I've used this wording myself, including in interview questions, as shorthand when describing forms of readership eluded me. I find this terminology clumsy in application. It implies a one-way process of "media" being dispensed into receptive consumers, instead of a reflexive process in which the reader of a text (be it a literary text or another form of media) critically engages with the text, bringing their own biases, assumptions, and history to their reading. "Media" also more aptly references the medium of a text than its message or content, while the discourse of consuming media flattens all of these into one. The term's framing of art as a consumer good and its audience as consumers strikes me as a symptomatically neoliberal understanding of art.

I related a fraction of these thoughts to Oscar in less than eloquent terms. He added a helpful distinction between storytelling as monologue and storytelling as creating dialogue. Indeed, it's more useful to think of storytelling as food not through the act of consuming a text, but as communion—a gathering that enables community bonds and collective identity formation. According to Hage (2010:418-419), a sense of community is crucial to feeling at home, meaning that "shared symbolic forms, shared morality, shared values, and most importantly perhaps, shared language" build the foundations for generating a sense of belonging, especially in the diaspora where one is disempowered by cultural illegibility. I argue that Asian diasporic cultural producers do the work of using language to engage affective kinship between individuals in the diaspora distinct from national/ethnic identity categories of their old and new homes, facilitating the ability to practice a sense of shared identity and a sense of shared culture. They also use this ability to contest appropriations of identity politics which control their cultural production.

"I know less about Asian American [media], but a lot of Asian Canadian work does end up getting tangled up in debates of authenticity," Maxine said in the focus group interview, "particularly authenticity when compared to the country that your family's originally from, or that your community is originally from. Like, oh, is something 'actually Filipino?' And that goes for the artists themselves too, like, 'Are you actually Filipino?'

"I think [it depends] on how it's handled, but I often think that it's a very silly debate, because we're judging ourselves by standards that we can't possibly fulfill, because we grew up and were socialized in different contexts. Filipinos in the Philippines, Filipinos in Canada, in different parts of Canada, in the US— we all have different experiences. It's very unfair to put us to a standard of 'this is what Filipino looks like.' I feel like a lot of Asian Canadian art ends up interfacing with that debate. Sometimes [artists] put a very interesting play on it, like critiquing authenticity, or saying that there's a new kind of authenticity, [authentic] to Asian Canadian experience. I feel like oftentimes, it's a very silly debate that gets us nowhere, and kind of just wastes our time."

The idea of authenticity tends to hold cultural foods to mythicized standards and stereotypes which omit forms of innovation, intercultural exchange, and heterogeneity, in effect relegating cultural foods and communities attached to them to the past. The concept of culinary essentialism describes how the need to recreate familiarity in diaspora emphasizes a "pure" national cuisine that blurs distinctions between local and global products (Collins 2008). Before the multicultural era, culinary recognition and appreciation by members of the dominant culture eluded migrants like the Lebanese in Australia interviewed by Hage (2010), who hid their culinary practices of home-building from what they perceived as the "Anglo gaze" out of fear of rejection (p. 426). This continuous sense of surveillance in migrant food practices motivated me to think analytically about stories and textual or artistic forms of migrant cultural production— and the attentional economies surrounding them— in the way of food. The notion of authenticity in writing from the margins necessarily creates standards for what representations register as authentic to certain identities. It also raises the question of who enforces (consciously or unconsciously, individually or institutionally) these standards in the creative and intellectual fields diasporic storytellers work with.

Vuong, in a conversation with author Bryan Washington (2020), suggests that the taste for marginalized hardship in publishing pressures them as writers to approach the marginalized communities and social worlds they write from as "fantastical" or "exotic." Further, this taste for alterity—and by association, hardship— is a result of the distribution of power in the industry:

> …it's hard to make money as an agent, so you have to have a lot of privilege. You have to be able to not have to urgently take care of refugee mothers… It's not an accident that it's predominantly run by white women… And I taste tongue in cheek when a journalist asks me, 'Oh, you have such an interesting life.' I say, actually, if you look at the history of our species, geopolitical rupture is incredibly commonplace. I would argue that living in a suburban home is quite exotic. … Only about in the fifties did the suburban sprawl with the Levittowns occur. So this is actually a very young development in our culture. But publishing has not curated that…we look at what was valued in the seventies and eighties with the suburban novel… (Vuong & Washington 2020)

Because marginalized experiences have been mostly exotic to the publishing industry until relatively recently, they are illegible to elites within compared to what elites are familiar with. This illegibility limits the dynamic breadth of marginalized experiences, communities, and cultures to static tropes that *are* familiar to elites— tropes which tend to elide these social worlds' complexity and continuity, and which in turn shape marginalized writers' assumptions of what they should represent in their writing and how to represent it.

On the opposite edge of Vancouver's West End, Virginia and I sat looking over the boat-crowded docks that led all the way across the water to Stanley Park. A graduating MA student starting her PhD in New York in the coming fall, Virginia met me for a walk during a short window between panels at a philosophy conference. She found me near the entrance of the Waterfront Fairmont Hotel. We walked past the Canada Place sails along the seawall but eventually ran out of breath and found a bench. Families, seagulls, tourists, and dog-walkers came and went.

Taken on the Coal Harbour seawall

"I certainly don't love it when artists are pigeonholed in[to] telling certain kinds of stories," Virginia told me. "'You're Asian, you have to tell Asian stories.' And I'm like, 'No, I'll tell whatever I want, thank you.' And I think they can be for good intentions. I've been told— if you're a minority writer— poetry books don't sell. Most fiction books don't sell. What you can reliably make money off is probably in nonfiction. And if you want to tell nonfiction stories, [they] generally have to be about your life experiences, and people will want to pigeon[hole] you as an immigrant and having an immigrant story or a female immigrant story or whatever. I've always been very disinterested in telling that story. I think it's really private. I think it's not part of my artistic identity. Or it's not at the forefront of my artistic identity.

"But at the same time, I believe that some people have to tell those stories. And I certainly don't think white people should tell those stories. So if not me, then whom? Someone who resembles me, I guess, I just don't want to do that. I'm struck with the dilemma of knowing that these stories are valuable, but not wanting to feel responsible for telling them. What if I get 'the immigrant story' wrong? What if my position and my privileges fail to characterize the universal experience? I don't really want to be held accountable for that. And indeed no individual should."

Oscar used the same term as Virginia—"dilemma"—to convey his feelings of dissonance in relation to the representative molds accessible to him and his art, perceived expectations that industry elites hold for the work of people like himself, and more specifically the sense that a responsibility has been put on him to address questions of identity. "How do I put it— it feels like there's a lot of work created for you, all these obstacles, when you're trying to succeed in the context of a[n artistic] career. Because you have all these dilemmas — you have these two worldviews that [don't] fit into the culture of 'colonial Canada.' So it feels like you have to be the one to address it when it shouldn't be your job to do that."

Other interviewees, like Virginia, had expressed thoughts like Oscar's. I commented, "I feel like that's something that a lot of immigrant creatives relate to. It's like, oh, I should be telling my story— But I don't want to. I don't feel like it's my story. The world makes it feel like I have to tell it."

"My goal should be just creating, right?" Oscar said. "But you have all these structures put in place by people in power, who also are very colonial-minded. [It's telling you who you are] in a way that's like, 'Hey, we want you to be the best version of yourself.' I didn't know there was a best version. It's all about our writing, how other people perceive our writing, and whether it wins awards or recognition."

For Oscar, the connection that his creative work established between himself and his reader was more meaningful and urgent than the markers of success offered by the industry. "Slowly … you figure out your writing is another tool for helping your community progress, wherever you see your belonging in. I'm trying to … contribute to the Asian diaspora, with not necessarily the intention of being recognized. [Somewhere] down the line, if there's a kid, you know, fifty years later who reads an Asian Canadian magazine and sees a part of my writing and is inspired by that, then that would mean way more than an award sitting on a mantel." We had just left Centre A, where we'd seen the spines of *Ricepaper Magazine* issues lined up on a shelf in a library dedicated to Asian Canadian literature. "That's how I was inspired by Jim Wong Chu. Jim Wong Chu is known to be a great [local] community organizer and writer, but he used to work for

Canada Post in Chinatown right there." Oscar pointed down the road. "He wasn't rich in any sense of the word. I feel a lot of his recognition [came] after his death [in 2017]. His life meant probably a lot more to people like me than someone who's won the Booker Prize, for instance."

Taken at Centre A

But for Virginia, questions surrounding the relationship between identity and creative output remained diametric. “So maybe there’s a duty to tell my immigrant story or whatever. I don’t think my immigrant story is very good. It might be socially important to get it out, but at the end of the day I might place priority in the aesthetic value. That might be controversial because it might commit me to endorsing bad art… I’m tempted to say that art has to be first and foremost aesthetically valuable. I just don’t think my immigrant story is really good. … It’s not that interesting, and I have to bullshit my way to find the interesting story. It’s just not truthful. I might as well present it as any story about anyone. It’s not my story in particular that I find, like, a particular duty to tell. I think maybe I feel a duty to contribute to representation and diversity in art, but I don’t see myself as a person in my art, as a specific individual, very distinctly.”

Political theorist Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò (2022:71) argues that

> [w]e are surrounded by a discourse that locates attentional injustice in the selection of spokespeople and book lists taken to represent the marginalized, rather than focusing on the actions of the corporations and algorithms that much more powerfully distribute attention. This discourse ultimately participates in the weaponization of attention in the service of marginalization.

My participants’ feelings of being stuck between the representations they are expected to produce and the work they actually produce and want to produce reach beyond the difference between genuine connection with readership and award-winning recognition. They stem from a politics that appropriates marginalized experiences, like those of young diasporic writers who find themselves in a position where their creative output and desire to create are met by demands for authenticity they cannot meet, in the name of diversity. This performance of deference does redistribute attention in the short term, but masks essential power relations that continue to exist in institutions (Táíwò 2022).

The participants reported feeling pressured to write certain stories or to portray narratives and aspects of their life and identity as Asians, as immigrants, as minority writers. Virginia observes that these expectations don’t necessarily come from a place of malice or ill intent. Attempts by those with some form of decisive power in the publishing industry, for example, to rectify social injustices like racism and invite

diversity into its ranks often involve "uplifting" marginalized voices by deferring to them— moving the spotlight to shine on them, placing them at the forefront of attention so as to make them visible. Usually, this means deferring to people who have been marginalized within the publishing industry rather marginalized from participating in it altogether (Táíwò 2022). But "centering the most marginalized" and seeking out representative voices based on categories of identity typically looks like

> handing conversational authority and attentional goods to whoever is already in the room and appears to fit a social category associated with some form of oppression — regardless of what they have and have not actually experienced, or what they do or do not actually know about the matter at hand. … [T]he rules of deference have often meant that the conversation stayed in the room, while the people most affected by it stayed outside. (Táíwò 2022:70-71)

The demand for marginalized voices in publishing arises from conscious efforts to make the industry more equitable and to open opportunities to those who have thus far been unable to participate in it. In some cases it manifests as a market demand, enacted to fill a quota for representation and, in the case of Asian diasporic writers, turning into a searchlight for identification with the oppressive conditions of migration and racialization. It is not the empowerment of marginalized writers to freely represent their lived experiences that I scrutinize—it is the orientation toward representations of hardship as a latent criterion of legibility for writers of marginalized identities that, in my analysis, defines this phenomenon.

The result is that people like Oscar and Virginia, who lead different lives and produce different work, share similar perceptions of outside influences constraining what they are expected to create. Oscar's anecdotes suggest that they feel somewhat cornered into flattening the complexities of their private life into a representative product to satisfy industry demands, while Virginia's conundrum has to do with the dissonance of being asked to embody the narrow identities assigned to her as an artist. Vuong (quoted in Morris 2023) tackles the role of the self in art Virginia struggles with by distinguishing between memoir and autobiography:

> the latter I take quite literally to be "the writing of the self." It's a tricky thing, though, because I've learned that writers of colour are often expected to perform a kind of ethnography in their work that's devoid of "craft" – or worse, that their work is read as "mere" reportage, creating a myth that the work is only valuable for its "exotic" subject and not for its artistic strategies. In this way, I have great affinity with [Toni] Morrison's claim that "I am not my work," and, further, that my work is not just my experience, but rather a questing forward from experience.

As people in the "rooms" of publishing with growing consciousness of the industry's inequalities and biases ask for marginalized voices, they also create the potential for an environment in which signs associated with alterity— signs which render marginalized identities legible to elites— become accepted into prevalence to a degree at which they graduate into expectation. Writers, especially emerging ones, may then internalize this expectation as one to take on the weight of their own or others' experiences (or those of subjects with less privilege than themselves) of being marginalized— which for many could feel painful or awkward or, like Virginia claims, irrelevant to their personal thematic interests.

As I write a sociological thesis heavily featuring Vuong and both his poetry and lived experiences, I am doubly conscious of the distinction he makes between experience and "questing forward from experience." In particular, I'm conscious of my position relative to the relationship between researcher and ethnographic subject; do I confound the relationship's boundaries, or do I corroborate them? Above, Vuong is referring to the ways in which racialized writers' work is read by those they are othered by. But I am also interested in the question of at what point does the work of representing one's racial identity or trauma transcend reportage into the realm of art— into something with transformative properties that moves the boundaries of identity? What is involved in the creative and intellectual labour that sustains this process of "questing forward from experience?" I'm ultimately interested in how writers' craft responds or "talks back" (Chen 2023) to dominant perceptions, narratives, and systemic cruelties racialized immigrants are subjected to, in order to autonomously enforce and clarify their identities in relation to them.

Morrison, reflecting on the work of "filling in the blanks" left by slave narratives of the past, notes that sales figures from the time demonstrated a "hunger" for stories about slaves. Instead of expanding creative and intellectual possibilities for Black writers, these works were "repeatedly scorned as inflammatory and biased and improbable by literary critics" (Morrison 1995:94). They were written with knowledge that their audience had the power to "make a difference in terminating slavery" and so appealed to the sympathies of their (white) audience, to persuade (white) readers and "summon up [their] finer nature in order to encourage [them] to employ it" against slavery. "In shaping the experience [of slavery] to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe" with "no mention of their interior life" (Morrison 1995:90-91), testifying to the interpretive labour Black writers had to perform to write with, not against, the representational expectations of their elites. Morrison's (1995:91) own imaginative and interpretive labour then opened these interior worlds to her contemporary readers. According to her, that labour was "critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic" (Morrison 1995:91).

It is clear that my participants are conscious of these expectations and inequalities, and problematize them. How do writers go about negotiating expectations of social and creative labour while managing the dual gazes of elites who see them as spokespeople, and the cultures and communities they are tasked with representing? How do these expectations compromise their craft and artistic direction? Virginia noted linguistic trends she has seen employed in Asian Canadian poetry and her doubts about their efficacy in navigating different audiences: "I see Chinese American, Chinese Canadian poets borrow directly [from] East Asian language in their poetry. So they'll have English lines, and then just Chinese characters sprinkled around. That's an approach I've seen. Or they'll have the Romanized Pinyin. I've always been a little bit more ambivalent about that approach. Because I'm confused as to, like, who's the audience for that kind of work? I think there [are] commonalities in an Asian diasporic experience, but not necessarily commonalities in their language abilities. A lot of people who immigrate

lose their maternal tongue. So if you write in that way, I think you're sort of unnecessarily pigeonholing the kinds of people that will respond to that art. I think that's a little bit too narrow. I think it's innovative, I think it's new…I just don't know if I've just seen enough of it, or seen enough of it being criticized and improved, to really understand which kind of mindset I should go into appreciating it with. How do you count the rhythm and the emphasis beats when the stanza is in two different languages? Where's the rhyming scheme in those situations? I'm confused about that sometimes. But maybe it's just about my personal limitations as an artist and as a critic, I don't know. I prefer to write purely in English, but I don't think that means that the things I write [are] devoid of cultural baggage."

R.F. Kuang, an author of multiple bestselling books that gained widespread popularity in online book communities, demonstrates on a larger scale how she interprets the social systems writers of colour are embroiled in—not representing or describing them, but interpreting in a generative way that extends existing knowledge and ideas about these systems and how power moves within them. In 2023, Kuang published *Yellowface*, a satirical novel poking fun at contemporary publishing industry drama in which a white author passes off an Asian-American writer's manuscript as her own when the latter dies in a freak accident. Kuang (2023) referred to US Cold War era propaganda to inform her white protagonist's racist generalizations about Asian people. She speaks on how "leaning into" stereotypes to study them, getting past the initial "knee-jerk reaction" to racist tropes, may allow us to learn more about the assumptions, beliefs, desires, paranoias, fears of those who constructed those stereotypes (Kuang 2023).

Kuang (2023) expresses her interest in "why being a minority is appealing:" "If you read any reports about who's getting book deals, who's getting big advances, who's getting published—we've barely made any progress since the seventies." Yet literary yellowface is not a new or uncommon phenomenon, as Kuang (2023) puts it— multiple white writers within the last decade have "adopted Asian-sounding pen names because they thought there might be some benefit in appearing like a minority." With measures that filter what kind of work from marginalized writers gets published and visiblized, the market becomes populated by that kind of work. Kuang attributes the contradictory

attitudes and perceptions of marginalization in publishing to a "commodification of the way we talk about race in publishing and marketing" and its detachment from lived realities of culture, community, and marginalization, all of which creates a tokenistic configuration "where it seems there are some golden opportunities that are only available to you if you present as diverse in some way" (Kuang 2023).

As Donna Haraway (2016:35) puts it, "it matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges… It matters what stories tell stories." Kuang (2023) thinks that questions about who has the rights or qualifications to tell which stories seem like the wrong questions to ask. She is more concerned with how writers approach their stories, and what stories *those* stories tell:

> We're storytellers, and the point of storytelling is, among other things, to imagine outside of your lived experience and empathise with people who are not you, and to ideally write truthfully, and with compassion, a whole range of characters… Are they engaging critically with tropes and stereotypes that already exist in the genre? Or are they just replicating them? What is their relationship to the people who are being represented? … Most importantly, does the work do something interesting? Is it good? … [Concern about the "permission to speak"] usually gets wielded as a double-edged sword against marginalised writers, to pigeonhole them into only writing about their marginalised experiences. (Kuang 2023; rumpus)

Kuang's verbiage eerily parallels Virginia's and my own, even though I interviewed Virginia over a year before Kuang's interview was published. What's interesting is the perceived incompatibility of measuring the value of art as "good" or "bad" and evaluating art for its representative qualities, which both Virginia and Kuang underscored. It almost recalls the difficult relationship between perceptions of (qualitative) research contributions and its generalizability, and the relationship between ethnographic subject and researcher I struggled with.

Táíwò and Kuang both refer to a process by which the visible performance of deference—"passing the mic" or "stepping back" to redistribute attention or space to someone else, as Táíwò (2022:75) puts it—appropriates the identities of individuals in the "room" to create the illusion of change while continuing to mask essential power relations, especially the power that the "room" itself maintains regardless of who is

commanding attention within the room. People who are "elites" in one room may be marginalized in another, and those who are marginalized in one room often can be elites in another room (Táíwò 2022). Táíwò uses the pertinent example of US— and Canadian— immigration to illustrate this process on a larger scale. For most of the twentieth century, immigration was only available to Europeans, an exclusion that earned Hitler's regard, before the US opened borders to more people with a preference for so-called skilled labour: "The selectivity of US immigration law helps explain the rates of educational attainment in the Nigerian diasporic community that raised me, which in turn helps explain the wealth, class advantages, and cultural expectations that fueled [Táíwò's] own educational development" (Táíwò 2022:78).

My participants and I are each privileged and marginalized in our own ways, but our presence in the rooms of Canadian intellectual and creative institutions is in itself a privilege not afforded to many others. They might not have had the means to migrate, or they may lack the social and cultural resources to enter these rooms, or they might not have access to the education and knowledge those of us in these rooms take for granted. Several participants have parents with relatively high-ranking qualifications in their countries of origin. Virginia's father is a pharmaceutical distributor in China ("It's a lot of blood money," she said dryly), and Allen's Taiwanese father has a master's degree and a PhD. Economic capital notwithstanding, these positions suggest a certain level of cultural competency—knowledge about how to apply to university, to give an example, which my parents lacked because they weren't college-educated. Even if one is minoritized and experiences marginalization in Canada, one might be privileged in other contexts and places, and vice versa.

The dual consciousness resulting from this transient relationship with social mobility characterizes one of the contradictions of diasporic identity-making, a split of the self not dissimilar to the multiverse alter egos in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. When she and her mother immigrated to Canada, Virginia was six and lived "somewhere in the southern part of Vancouver for a bit. We were in a shitty one-bedroom apartment for quite some time. That I remember really distinctly, because I think we were, like, relatively well-off when we were in mainland China. You know, I had nannies. We had

people, like service workers, come in our homes. We were super well-off. And then obviously, the transition— [we were] comparatively very not well-off in Canada. You know, slept in a one-bedroom, washed clothes by hand, were really frugal. So I [had] a radically bifurcated sense of, like, am I privileged? I spent most of my childhood in a shitty apartment with a mattress but no bed frame." It also complicates a static and binary view of privilege and marginalization and, consequently, the sense that one's privileges prevent them from claiming marginalization even while experiencing it.

The illegibility of one's cultural and social credentials is another dysfunction of the habitus. Virginia spoke of her parents' reluctance in navigating drastic changes in their social position in Canada and their resistance to assimilating into the local culture. "[My parents were] primarily looking at countries or cities with big Asian enclaves, to preserve their … way of life. My dad to this day will not eat Western food. He, like, just can't handle it. And I don't really think he knows how to distinguish between different kinds of Western food. They're pretty much the same thing, for him… It's very bifurcated. It's either Western or not. So I think for the most part, they were super resistant to changing their way of life. And that reflects the fact that they were, like, upper-class in their hometown and their city where they grew up. So they were really expecting to recreate the kinds of relationships they had, the kind of social standings they had, in their new homes. And I'm not entirely sure they were... I mean, I'm sure they were aware that being immigrants or immigrant families had struggles and it was difficult. But I think they expected still to be on the upper echelon of social hierarchies…

"They eventually settled down in Richmond. My dad to this day will not want to go to stores where, like, the employees don't speak Chinese. And I'm like, come on. Let's get on with the times… My brother and I are very much Canadian. It's like a cultural rift. I mean, maybe it's also just a generational rift. My parents are, like, old-fashioned. But my brother and I, we're Canadians. In some ways, maybe we perceive our experiences as outsiders. Because we're aware that we're not like white people [or] white Canadians. But I don't know if my parents ever perceived themselves that way. They're surrounding themselves with, like, other Asians, and they see very much that the world is

theirs for the taking. They were up on a social hierarchy before and they're still up there now."

To clarify, I asked Virginia if her parents were unconcerned about experiencing unbelonging and discrimination in Canada. "Yeah," she said, "and then sometimes, I think that they feel like they're the ones privileged to do the discriminating. They'll be mildly racist or seriously racist, and in a way that, like, only dominant groups can be, right? Like, they'll say really hateful things about Black people. And I'm like, what? You realize that you're part of the minority? [It] doesn't even make sense for you, in your position, to say that. It's not to your benefit. But yeah, I don't know if they realize that being a minority is not...or at least for me, you know, being part of the Western world, it feels different. I wonder what the best analogy would be— they see being in Vancouver sort of like being in Hong Kong. It's just an extension of the sort of mainland [China] dynamics that they're familiar with. And in this case, I wonder if class maybe transcends race [for them]. Like it's the class [factor] that explains why."

Allen's parents also chose to move to Vancouver from Taiwan because the size of the Chinese community and cultural enclave made it "less of a cultural shock for them." We walked at a relaxed pace under the August sun, winding our way along the Stanley Park seawall. Shade from trees lining the path passed us by like streetlights in a car. Allen clarified that their parents also acknowledged that there were "a lot of English-speaking people and white people, so it was a good balance. I guess that's kind of the reason why my parents don't really— especially my dad, he's like, not a fan of Richmond and he's not a fan of like, Surrey, Burnaby. Because he's like, 'Oh, I want my kids to be, like, a part of white culture,' right? At the same time, he's like, 'Oh, you can't be too white. You got to remember where you come from.'"

Taken on the Stanley Park seawall

But Allen, an undergraduate sociology major, felt alienated as a nonbinary person from what they identified as their parents' gendered cultural expectations and adherence to traditional gender norms. Allen described gendered divisions of labour within his family wherein women are burdened with effectively all the domestic labour while men are exempt from expectations to do this work—an arrangement which relegated Allen to the kitchen with women and aunties while his dad and brother watched TV, talked on their phones, and delivered directives such as, "You should go help set the table. You should go help bring the rice out." Allen's being treated the way women are treated also shapes his individual relationships with family members: "Every time I FaceTime my grandma, she's just like, 'How's your brother doing? You should be taking care of him. Have you been making him breakfast?' I'm like, 'First of all, I don't live there. Second of all, no.'"

Allen said that his family background influenced his creative and intellectual work, and he had used this work to make sense of his entangled relationships with gendered, familial, and cultural norms: "I've written poems about the gendered division of labour and the feeling of unfairness and the whole cultural thing of women being separate from the men, I guess, and also the feeling of alienation from both of those roles… There was one paper that I did for class [that] was just like, how queer people in Taiwan sort of explore where they fit into family now that they've come out, right? Because traditionally, guys have rules in the family, girls have rules in the family—what happens when you're the son-in-law instead of the daughter-in-law? And if you're the daughter-in-law but you are trans, you are very butch, where's your role? … Do you act as the son, do you act as the daughter? And how does your family negotiate? That's something I've also kind of thought about because, I don't know…I probably won't ever come out to my family gender-identity-wise, but that's kind of something I think about is, how would I fit into my family if I come out? And then, like, as a nonbinary person? How would that fit into their cultural perspective? … Because I know in Taiwan, it's a very binary kind of way of thinking about gender and sexuality. So my parents, like my family, they understand gay, straight, but they don't understand bisexual. [My cousin is bisexual, and she married a man, and she has a child with him. So my mom has made comments about, like, 'Oh yeah, she used to be gay. But look, she's a straight person.'] And so they understand cis and trans, but they don't necessarily understand this in-between."

Táíwò (2022:79) argues that

> [o]ur sense of ourselves — and the patterns of deference we tend to fit to our standpoint epistemological commitments — often foregrounds the ways in which we are marginalized, rather than the ways we are not. A privileged person in an absolute sense … may nevertheless experience themselves consistently on the low end of the power dynamics of their immediate social world.

My participants' anecdotes offer another way in which people process the experience of inhabiting multiple social worlds and their power dynamics. Inversely, the privileged person entering a room—country—in which they are on the low end of the power

dynamics may have trouble relinquishing symbolic and affective tokens of the privileges they once enjoyed.

Louisa, a second-year design student, told me her father "worked in the government office [back in Korea], so he had, like, [a] huge ego, I guess." Louisa's parents had moved their family to Canada for a less high-pressure education system and way of life, paralleling contemporary lifestyle migration trends in which East Asian (especially Chinese) students and parents seek out more humane and less hypercompetitive education in other countries. But when Louisa's father got a healthcare assistant role in Canada, he felt that the work degraded his social standing: "[He] was like, 'How could you make me— How could you think that it's okay for me to do that job? Wiping someone else's butt? That's not cool. You're my daughter, you should do that for me.' And I was very confused that—how come me doing it is okay, but you doing it is not okay? He was I guess entitled in a way, because he would just tell me to do lots of things like, 'Check this bill again, the number doesn't add up,' [Louisa and her mother ran a restaurant in Vancouver] and things like that. But then sometimes I don't want to do [it] because he's so demanding." She became more animated, speaking faster, toward the end. We walked beside False Creek with the Science World globe behind us. Joggers and dogs frequently passed us.

Taken by False Creek

Táíwò (2022:79) writes that

> [t]he rooms we are in play a central part in developing and refining our political subjectivity and our sense of ourselves. … People are — and ought to be — vying for respect, dignity, and some measure of recognition alongside policy reforms and material redistribution. We all deserve these attentional goods, which are often denied, even to the 'elites' of marginalized and stigmatized groups. Moreover, distributions of respect and care can be won and lost collectively; there is some connection between the inside of the room and the outside. … This focus on one's own relative marginalization is especially easy to cultivate when exposure to people below us in the relevant hierarchies is controlled or prevented, which is, after all, a great deal of what rooms do.

"I think he thought very highly of himself," Louisa said. "I mean, I think he deserves that. But also, he doesn't speak the language here… So of course he would go down." I assumed she meant moving downward in social mobility and status, like Virginia's parents. "Like, what do you expect? But I guess he hasn't felt that way for over fifty years. So yeah, everything was so new to him. And, you know, I think older generations, they haven't been in a position of being a new person for a long time. So yeah, I think he had a really hard time too. But sometimes he would yell at me saying, like, 'How could

you do this to me? You're my daughter, I pay for your tuition. I brought you into life.' But, you know, I never asked [for it]."

Unlike her parents, Virginia is "really powerfully aware of being a minority, but that's also because I work in fields where it was really obvious. I work in academia and philosophy in particular. Philosophy has a white boy problem. It always has… Philosophy has some of the worst offenders for gender and racial equality within the arts. It resembles— it's the engineering [field] of the arts because—why? Why are you like this? Yeah, I'm aware of being different." Louisa, Allen, and Virginia's representations of their fathers seem to contradict the strong awareness of their own minority status that these participants express. According to their children, the parents behave as if they are unaffected by or averse to Western societal norms. The parents' responses to awareness of their uprooted social worlds, and their sense of their identities in relation to others, diverge from the younger generation's. Their staunch opposition to what they perceive as Western cultural norms responds conservatively to their newfound social precarity, whereas Virginia and Louisa both talked about how when they experienced changes in culture and status, they had the flexibility of rearranging their cultural habitus to make sense of their new positions.

"I considered myself as a popular kid back in Korea," Louisa said. "You know, texting all the time and all that. But then here, all the rules that [were] in my head didn't work. And I had to learn the new rules, but I didn't know what [they were]. How people treated me was so different… I found some good people who recognize me, but—maybe it sounds really shallow, but I feel like I'm [at] the bottom of the hierarchy."

It is common to be the only person of colour in these literal and figurative rooms, as Virginia relates. "Really, I don't know if I want the burden of being representative of people like me. I get students who are like, 'Virginia, I'm so inspired by you being a woman philosopher.' And I'm like, 'You shouldn't [be]. I'm gonna fuck this up almost instantly.' I have anxieties and skepticism about my own abilities. I think that if you are taken to be representative of your community … audiences will want to see their lives

represented in a certain way. But artists are individuals. And I think it's really important for artists in particular to be individuals. So I don't know if that's really fair...

"I used to do competitive debate, [and] when people would be, like, speaking about communities of colour, everyone would be looking at me, because obviously I'm the only person of colour. And it's like, stop looking at me. I don't really have anything insightful to say about this. … And this happens in academia, too, I think. You'll see faculty of colour or other minorities being delegated to perform social equity roles. When someone's experiencing discrimination in the classroom, they will often go to, like, a minority faculty and express that and expect that faculty member to do the labor of helping them and reporting the incidents, or offering them support. I have always been, like, conflicted about— because I don't know if I'm qualified to do that. And I'm not sure why you would assume I'm qualified to give support. What if I'm really bad at being supportive? I'm an asshole. Anyone can be, right? So I think there's a lot of pressure there."

In Virginia's experience, deference to her minority status in the fields she works in placed the onus of redressing social inequity within those fields onto her, increasing the amount of labour she is burdened with performing and counterintuitively replicating the conditions of that inequity. Táíwò cautions that the habit of deferment can

> supercharge moral cowardice, as the norms of deference provide social cover for the abdication of responsibility. It displaces onto individual heroes, a hero class, or a mythicized past the work that is ours to do in the present. … More importantly, deference places the accountability that is all of ours to bear onto select people — and, more often than not, a sanitized and thoroughly fictional caricature of them… It advertises itself as deferring to marginalized voices and perspectives, but in conceding so much creative space to the blueprint of society, it is perhaps better understood as deference to the built structure of society. (Táíwò 2022:81-83)

Vuong (2020) offers one perspective on how deference takes advantage of the marginalizing conditions of being an immigrant while it claims generosity: "Growing up as an immigrant, no was like a deathly word. We were taught never to say no, any crack of a door that opens for you, say yes, and bow profusely in gratitude for any yes you get." He further emphasizes the consciousness one needs to exercise when working under

deferment in order to speak back to it. Specifically, Vuong questions our need to meet expectations and our right to say no:

> For me it was learning the value and the power of "no." It took me a long time to learn how to say no to things that were not right for me in order to say yes to myself and the things that were right for me. And I think that as a concept, to use no rather than avoid it, and I think as a larger American culture, we're really terrified of no. We're terrified of even saying honestly how we feel. (Vuong 2020)

In a time when one is continuously expected to step up and step to the front, Vuong suggests that it can be an act of self determination (or simply a sense of relief) to step back instead and decline visibility.

Hage (2010:417) argues that the collapsing of all migrant nostalgia and "yearning for home into a single 'painful' sentiment" like homesickness is "guided by a 'miserabalist' tendency in the study of migration that wants to make migrants passive pained people at all costs." The arguments in this chapter and thesis resist that tendency by demonstrating that diasporic Asian cultural producers are actively aware of identities imposed onto them. "Writings on migrant homes appear as if there are no migrants living in them," Hage (2010:420) writes. "In this sense, nostalgia is assumed to be the exact opposite of home-building: a refusal to engage with the present, and a seeking of an imaginary homely past as a hiding place from the present time and space. Migrants apparently are an essentially depressed mob." The next chapter subverts these assumptions of diasporic interiority by showing how skilled interpretive and intellectual labour enables Asian diasporic writers to use language to respond to racial expectations on their own terms.

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Chapter 3. "Fucking with Language:" Interpretive Resistance

> *Americans worship their obsessions in violent ways— / they write them down.*
>
> (Natalie Diaz 2020:84)

I asked my friend how she liked *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong's first novel, after I recommended it to her. She answered with a metaphor that likened reading the novel to eating at a three-Michelin-star restaurant: she was excited to dig in because the food was prepared by someone who is excellent at their craft, but the dish she was ultimately served seemed more dedicated to presenting something "artsy" than it was to filling her hunger.

The metaphor recalls the impulse to conceptualize art as something consumable touched on in the previous chapter. Although I can't fault anyone for their affective response to art, I became melodramatic after hearing her feedback. I thought of how Vuong wrote a dozen drafts of his debut novel by hand while teaching undergrads at NYU leading up to the 2016 election cycle, how putting pen to paper became his daily bread and a way to survive political crisis:

> When I went in there, everything fell away, the world fell away, and I could go back in time, go back in 2003 and 2004 (a lot of this book takes place in the Bush era). It was kind of like this cockpit I went into every day. And that was the first time I understood what a lot of writers say. A lot of times we say writing is my refuge, and we say that sometimes in an abstract sense, but for the first time in my life it was a true refuge. At the end of the day I looked forward to closing the closet door, holding the notebook, turning on the lamp, making a cup of tea, and crouching down in there, sliding back into that world. I really escaped into the past. It was like a fever dream. (Vuong 2019)

At the time, I worked at a hotel restaurant that had just introduced a new menu item—shakshouka, a North African and Middle Eastern dish of eggs poached in a spiced tomato sauce with harissa and other ingredients, which vary depending on who prepares

the dish. A server who had worked there for almost twenty years complained about how the chef had demanded that she say no to guests who asked for the eggs in their shakshouka prepared differently (scrambled on the side instead of poached in the sauce for example). Chef had similarly accosted me after a shift once, insisting that not poaching the eggs in the tomato sauce takes away everything that makes it shakshouka. The server challenged Chef to tell the guests that himself. She told me she wouldn't tell guests they couldn't have their eggs scrambled and face their ire just so Chef could preserve the integrity of "his precious dish."

I didn't tell her but I thought it was reasonable for him to draw a line here. The etymology of shakshouka derives from the Maghrebi Arabic term for "a mixture." The dish's preparation imitates its murky, contested origins which are usually traced back to the Columbian exchange, but there are competing claims because the dish is both very old and culturally widespread. The dish has also been implicated in Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestine, as modern Israeli cooks and writers include shakshouka as part of Israeli cuisine, attracting accusations of theft and appropriation. Smells, tastes, and spices simmer with centuries-long binding ingredients of globalization, commerce, colonial violence, and more. The existence of shakshouka is owed to the encounter.

Like my friend with Vuong's novel, the server attributed the chef's rigid standards to pedantry. I can see how one might look at excruciating attention to detail or flourishes of language ("a flick / of my wrist & a house rises / from the snow" (Vuong 2022:38)) and perceive a prioritization of craft over a more tangible and reader-centred pursuit, like the adrenaline rush triggered by an unexpected turn of plot. But shakshouka serves a different purpose and appetite, made from hundreds of years of intercultural encounters, than tomato sauce and scrambled eggs do. The previous chapter established the role of institutional illegibility in shaping Asian diasporic identity, and how writers understand their own legibility relative to dominant groups. This chapter wonders how they navigate Asian diasporic identity in intellectual institutions where they have to carry out the interpretive labour of making themselves and their work legible to others' appetites.

Often, racialized and marginalized individuals who are illegible to these institutions must take on the labour of understanding these relations and reading the affects of those with more power than them, while those with power in these institutions fail to extend the same efforts to understand the experiences and interior lives of marginalized individuals (Graeber 2012). Language, as Vuong exemplifies, is a way to engage with and resist what Graeber (2012:113) describes as "lopsided structures of the imagination" Graeber implicates in interpretive labour inequalities. As far as I can tell, Graeber had only written about interpretive labour in the context of bureaucracy, although he emphasized that his interest is not in bureaucracy and its mechanisms specifically but rather what they represent of institutional power and violence:

> it is not so much that bureaucratic procedures are inherently stupid, or even that they tend to produce behavior that they themselves define as stupid, but rather, that they are invariably ways of managing social situations that are already stupid because they are founded on structural violence. (2012:112)

The concept of interpretive labour has not seen much use since Graeber's 2012 essay based on his own 2006 lecture, though it has been recently invoked to help describe feminist agency and the power of negotiation in mokk pooj, the art of seducing one's husband, in Senegal (Gilbert 2019). This chapter explores the use of interpretive labour as a way to articulate the power relations implicated not only in interpersonal interactions but also in the relations between writer and reader, or artist and audience, in Asian diasporic literature.

My participants' stories in the previous chapter demonstrate that they exercise a weighted consciousness of their own alterity while navigating institutions. As Oscar put it, "the creative aspect is easy if you're an artist, because you have something to give," but the difficult part lies in the proposal-pitching, the gallery connections, and the imperative to "penetrate" certain spaces if you haven't already. Although they are physically present in these spaces (to borrow Táíwò's verbiage, these rooms), the accounts in this chapter narrate an acute sense of being an outsider, even when their speakers have ostensibly made it inside these rooms. For immigrant artists, language barriers, lack of social networks, and the marginalization that comes with displacement and racialization further entrench them in that outsider status. Instead of ending the story

at nihilism or resentment, my participants engage continuity by treating difficulties, interruptions, and indeterminacies "not only as objects for description but also as incitements to theory" (Tsing 2015:38).

Taken at Centre A

Vuong discusses how the privilege of legibility that he carries as a well-known writer only gets him so far in certain settings. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he teaches, Vuong went to retrieve his school ID only to be asked by a white woman who worked there if he spoke English (Chung 2022). Vuong notes in an interview that

> [s]he could have looked in my file and seen that I'm an English professor. But *I'm not legible until my career makes me legible* [emphasis added]. When I walk into an event, I'm Ocean Vuong doing a reading — I bypass some of the coded veils that Asian Americans are made invisible by, but only in that context. It's an insulated privilege that doesn't extend to other Asian Americans…to people like my mother, working in a nail salon. (Chung 2022)

What struck me in numerous interviews, poems, and writings of Vuong's is the way he articulates his navigation of the social worlds he is embroiled in. This movement is

mapped by overlapping roles he has occupied—as a writer, an immigrant, a queer man, a son, a student, a professor, and a celebrated poet, to name a few. One common aspect that evades mutability over space and time is the racialization underpinning Vuong's relationship with his surroundings and the institutions and people who make up those surroundings. Vuong's experiences stand out as threads of an inequality of interpretive labour that those who interact with him and his work neglect to perform, leaving him to bear the brunt of the labour and personal consequences of those interactions.

The violence of inequality, and of inequalities in interpretive labour, speaks to themes in other texts such as the subjectification of Asian Americans in the production of white, Western knowledge and its epistemologies in *How Much of These Hills is Gold*. Lucy and Sam's first day at their new schoolhouse provides an apt scene of how their family's living story comes to be subsumed into historical myth by a white intellectual's exoticizing account. Teacher Leigh (who is also a historian) seats Lucy and Sam in the back and welcomes them to his classroom, which he boasts "draws the border of civilization a little farther West." He asks the siblings where they're from — and when Lucy describes the trail from the last mine where they lived, he shakes his head: "Where are you *really* from, child? I've written at length about this territory, and never encountered your like" (Zhang 2020:110). Teacher Leigh ascribes Lucy to a further level of illegibility by assuming her to be illiterate when she bends to smell the pages of a new book. He "says, very gently, 'This [book] isn't for smelling or eating. This is called *reading*'" (Zhang 2020:110). An embarrassed Lucy pronounces the letters in that book, as well as the letters in more books Teacher Leigh produces, each increasing in thickness and decreasing in print size.

Teacher Leigh claps as if Lucy has performed a trick. He offers Lucy a hand and moves her to the front of the classroom, leaving Sam in the back, "and the boy sitting [next to Lucy] hunches his shoulders high, as if to block the sight of her. But here he can't help seeing her. None of them can. He slides over." The boy has no choice but to "[make] room for Lucy" (Zhang 2020:111). After Lucy has earned Teacher's Leigh respect, he treats her as if she is special — and her ma a "very special woman" (Zhang 2020:111) — and decides to write her family's history into his newest monograph.

Vuong wrote his first poem in the fourth grade, and his teacher, not believing Vuong could have written it, accused Vuong of plagiarism (Chung 2022). After this incident, though, Vuong noticed his teacher paying more attention to him and helping him type up assignments on the school computer — "I learned that putting the DNA of my mind on paper had garnered this white man's respect. I felt incredibly dangerous and powerful" (Chung 2022).

Writing was a way for Vuong to resist the "dead zones of the imagination" Graeber (2012:123) claims "riddles our lives." Although he "suspects that his mother, who was illiterate, didn't try to read because the struggle might make the distance between herself and her son more explicit" (Chung 2022), Vuong uses language and poetry traverse this distance. He claims that his mother felt literacy and poetry were "like sorcery, a portal to another world — to success, power — that she didn't understand," but she attended Vuong's readings anyway. Instead of watching her son, she shifted her chair so she could watch the audience listening to him:

> She read them while I was reading my work, and then she would say, "I understand now. I don't know what you're saying, but I can see how their faces change when you speak. I can feel how it's landing in the world." (Chung 2022)

Vuong's mother read his work by witnessing the reading of his work. This interaction embodies Oscar's description of storytelling—that it isn't necessarily the phonics but the transference of meaning from one person to another that constitutes the value of storytelling.

Just before the start of the tour for *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong's mother, Rose, got diagnosed with cancer (Chung 2022). Vuong accompanied her to the hospital where, "when she went herself, she got a heat pad. When [Vuong] came, with English, she went to the oncology ward" (Chung 2022):

> I thought, here we go again: I have to speak for you. I have to speak for your pain. I have to verbalize your humanity. Because it's not a given. Which is the central problem with how we value Asian American women (Chung 2022).

Vuong says he realized that his mother passed her vigilance on to him: "As a woman of color, an Asian woman, in the world, she taught me how to be vigilant. How people's faces, posture, tone, could be read. She taught me how to make everything legible when language was not" (Chung 2022). Her influence was a strong undercurrent in all Vuong's writing work— he went to school for her, wrote for her, published for her: "All the things I'd write, it was all to try to take care of her… she was the source. When that was taken away, I didn't have anything else to answer to." (Chung 2022). This is what distinguishes his third book and second full-length collection of poetry, *Time is a Mother*, from his previous works— with his mother gone, Vuong "finally wrote for [himself]" (Chung 2022).

Central to Graeber's concept of interpretive labour is how structural violence, "by which [he means] forms of pervasive social inequality" such as racism, "invariably tend[s] to create the kinds of willful blindness" (2012:112) wherein "human relations founded on violence create lopsided structures of the imagination where the responsibility to do the interpretive labour required … falls on the powerless, who thus tend to empathize with the powerful far more than the powerful do with them" (2012:105). Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2012) vocalized the effects of this willful blindness when she called out the City University of New York's denial of Audre Lorde's (who was the Poet Laureate then) requests to "teach in a way that allowed her to survive" and UC Berkeley's refusal to grant June Jordan medical leave while she had breast cancer:

> Let us be clear. The universities that we mistakenly label as our bright quirky only refuge for Black brilliance have worked our geniuses to death, and have denied us help when we asked for it. The universities that employed June Jordan, Audre Lorde and so many others, watched cancer eat away at our geniuses, as they simultaneously ate away at black women's labor… The university was not created to save my life. The university is about the preservation of a bright brown body. The university will use me alive and use me dead. (Gumbs 2012)

This lopsided structure and its effects make evident that interpretive labour lasts far longer than a single interaction, a fact that Vuong's interviews in this chapter also make clear. Making a living off intellectual labour that depends on institutional participation to

sustain means negotiating even the private aspects of one's life within the bounds of institutional violence.

For Vuong, this violence and his analysis of it bleeds into his poetry— "[b]ecause everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American / letters, turns to gold" (Vuong 2022:46). Girvan, Pardesi, Bhandar, and Nath (2020), four scholars who are colleagues and friends scattered geographically, propose a poetics of care as remedy for racial capitalism. They describe in their paper a practice of sharing prompts between their group, whose members then each respond to the prompts with bits of improvised poetry and imagery. The authors retroactively note how in this practice, they unknowingly followed Lorde's own practice of prompting, as Lorde had outlined in her cancer journals while she was sick (Girvan et al. 2020). For this group of academics, this practice first emerged from shared intersecting crises within the institution of the university as a way to be in community outside of the university (Girvan et al. 2020).

Soon, the prompting practice began to change their relationship "specifically because [they] were not doing it out of any institutional requirement" (Girvan et al. 2020:722). After their experimental shared poetry practice, it became clear to Girvan et al. (2020:720) that poetry was "a refusal to make the marginalized legible to those who rule." Absent the university's skeptical, conditional extraction of knowledge and intellect, Girvan et al. "entered realms of connection and imagination [they] did not anticipate, emotions [they] did not know [they] even needed to express or loved to express, such as cheekiness" (2020:722), and found healing from shared laughter. The weight of levity is emphasized here as necessities often denied or simply not thought of as necessities and therefore neglected. In this case, Girvan et al. articulate a liberation from the scrutinized legibility Vuong describes, accessed through poetics.

Chen Chen (2023) writes of how Filipino American writer Sarah Gambito's poetry exacts "sharp and layered humor" to several effects. Her poetry criticizes and offers relief from "the unpredictability and brutality of a system and culture that dehumanizes immigrants, especially immigrants of color." Chen (2023) connects Gambito's poetic speaker with his own mother, another Asian woman who is limited by

her oppressive circumstances into constraining the anger and curses she expresses in response to everyday racism around people she trusts, and becomes soft-spoken and polite around company outside the family as a survival tactic. This emotion management of presenting and articulating herself according to how she is situationally read and racialized speaks to how interpretive labour for migrants, like memory in the first chapter, is complicated by multiple axes of identity in relation to the people around her.

Chen's mother then uses dark humour to say what was, to their family, unsayable. Her joke about deportation "haunts" Chen because, "emerging from an immigrant precariousness," it acknowledges the slipperiness of their family's status in the US:

> Though we don't usually talk about it directly, there's a fear in my family that any day, any moment, we could lose everything we've built here, because we're not perceived as really *from here*. So, my mother makes a joke about deportation, a joke neither of us would make in any other context. (Chen 2023)

One of Gambito's poems, "Getting Used to It," describes the speaker's uncle prank-calling her father as immigration. For Chen it recalled his reactions to his mother's joke: "The body can't help but react—crack up or break down or, yes, both. The body knows the sadness behind the joke, which is funnier for how sad the situation is" (Chen 2023).

In Gambito's poem, the joke is told "over and over and ever" (Gambito quoted in Chen 2023) as the title ("Getting Used to It") implies: "an ongoing response to the drama, the tragicomedy that happens between the uncle and the father, which is also unfinished. It's this expression of an unending dilemma — when can an immigrant family finally feel at home, at peace?" (Chen 2023). At the same time, he argues that the "-ing" tense "asks the reader: can you get used to it? [...] 'It' may refer to the joke itself, to the telling of it, to the reactions it provokes, to the circumstances behind it — or to any combination of these" (Chen 2023). It is easy to see how this language work necessitates intellectual labour, but I argue that for work that deals with diasporic and racial marginalization and identity, this labour takes on another dimension. As Hage (2010:427) states, what differentiates migrant memory from any other memory is that "this attempt to contract the present is located in a space that marks a radical discontinuity with the remembered

past." Both Gambito's poetics and Chen's analysis show that achieving this contraction in the literary arts requires intimate knowledge of craft and how to use it to close this distance, in addition to the intellectual work of communicating these ideas.

But their language work is not just about representing aspects of identity. As my participants described in the first chapter, their creative writing practices are fed by a need for a personal outlet for their responses to oppression and otherness (like Chen's mother), and an urge to make sense of their own identities in relation to the broader world. Lorde (1985) described the urgency of poetry as a way to survive oppression. Her original missive considered poetry, for black women, as forming "the quality of the light within which [women] predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action." Lorde implicates language and poetry in mobilizing revolution.

The insistence that "poetry is not a luxury" additionally directs attention to the roles that poetry, art, pleasure, and fun play as a part of living, and indeed as part of the human experience — yet the same statement orients us to the ways in which these pleasures are in our current moment and climate neglected in their roles as necessities that should not be compromised.

Marx (1844) purported that

> [the capitalist] turns the worker into an insensible being lacking all needs, just as he changes his activity into a pure abstraction from all activity. To him, therefore, every luxury of the worker seems to be reprehensible, and everything that goes beyond the most abstract need — be it in the realm of passive enjoyment, or a manifestation of activity — seems to him a luxury. Political economy, this science of wealth, is therefore simultaneously the science of renunciation, of want, of saving and it actually reaches the point where it spares man the need of either fresh air or physical exercise.

Lorde's and Marx's words recall to me a poem in Vuong's newest collection, and more specifically the way the speaker's poetics (or rather, the oppression his poetics address) was interpreted by a woman at Brooklyn loft party:

> Once, at a party set on a rooftop in Brooklyn for an "artsy / vibe," a young woman said, sipping her drink, *You're so / lucky. You're gay plus you get*

> *to write about war and stuff. I'm / just white*. [Pause] *I got nothing.* [Laughter, glasses clinking]. Ocean Vuong (2022:46)

The woman understood his life circumstances as commodities which got him ahead in the game of publishing, but for the speaker, his poetry was a form of survival which allowed him to keep "dancing when the song was over, because it / freed [him]" (Vuong 2022:45). The poem's speaker dances because his people "made a rhythm this way" (2022:47), moving to machine-gun fire.

In the same poem, he goes on to confess, "My failure was that I got used to it. I looked at us, mangled / under the *Time* photographer's shadow, and stopped / thinking, *get up, get up*" (2022:47). For the woman at the loft party, the conflict necessary to give a story structure had to be mined or assigned by fate. But Vuong (2020) contests that it is

> such a privilege to demand that a story is only worthy of interest when we orchestrate conflict, because I think growing up poor, growing up in various marginalized environments and positions, life is conflict. You did not have to orchestrate it. Context is conflict. So I was more interested in seeing how individual conflicted contexts interact when they're next to each other through proximity, like a chemical reaction. I wanted to just see how folks become.

He notes that he sought to explore these questions because of his queerness, which he says saved his life by forcing him to think of possibilities beyond oppression: "Often we see queerness as a deprivation, but when I look at my life, I [see] that queerness demanded an alternative innovation from me. It made me curious, it made me ask [if] this is not enough for me because there's nothing for me here" (Vuong 2020).

Vuong's otherness attuned him to doorways in and out of social and emotional realms. The poetic landscape of *Time is a Mother* is strewn with entries and exits, and in many instances the speaker's and other characters' bodies *become* doorways of their own. Simultaneously an act of interpretation, creation, and transfiguration, the doorways in his poems are not just a way out, so to speak— they are method. They sketch ruptures in borders, bulletholes widening in walls, openings cleft between what was marked as "here" and "elsewhere." And they orient individuals — migrant, queer, racialized bodies — as agents of these ruptures as well as sites for rupture.

Taken at Centre A

Vuong extends that act of rupture into the publishing sphere. Writing, for him, involves going "into a system that has been established, often by hegemonic powers. We go into that container, and then we kind of fuck it up" (Washington & Vuong n.d.). "We subvert the expectations. We become slippery, slippery agents within something that was believed to be fixed, like the novel... And I'm excited about … sneaking in the back door and then working within those confines" (Washington & Vuong n.d.). This intellectual preoccupation with swimming against the tide of alterity is reflected in my participants' insights.

"I've been doing some research within my context of trying to explore what being an outsider means as an immigrant," Oscar told me as we walked through the Downtown Eastside. I had just told him about an issue of *Megaphone Magazine* I'd bought on Granville and Dunsmuir from a vendor who was ecstatic that I was even interested in a copy. The issue was composed of poetry and prose on intersecting climate, housing, and poverty crises. All of the writing emerged from writing workshops for people in transitory housing programs. "The concept of othering. It's very relevant in terms of

homelessness, for instance, as well as climate change, where you're othering species. If you don't know something, it's very easy for you to kill that thing."

Tsing (2015:20) describes how the vulnerable condition of precarity marks our epoch with unpredictable encounters and shifting assemblages "which remake us as well as our others… Thinking through precarity changes social analysis. … Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible." Crucially, world-making is not a process only humans practice. The precarity arising from the frameworks which buoyed and continue to reinforce modern capitalist imaginations remakes the world in proximity. From other organisms and species to other human beings around us, differentiation becomes the way we know each other, producing the effect of "othering" Oscar spoke to.

Oscar and I talked about language and gender— he brought up his corporate job and the influence of Pride Month on his workplace. "We've been kind of encouraged to [display] our pronouns, which is amazing. He, she, they, right? But in my language, which is Bengali, we actually don't have any— what is it called— gender, in the sense—" I had the idea that he was trying to referring to pronouns, but in his struggle to articulate he gestured to gender more broadly— "so it actually transcends even the 'they/them' gender. I was trying to explain that [at work]. And it was kind of interesting how they responded. They were like, 'Oh, we get it, but we'd still like you to stick to 'they' or 'she,' [and so on].' They won't entertain other cultures. But I'm like, 'It doesn't make sense.' I don't identify myself as a 'he/him,' 'they/them.' I identify as all of it. And none of it."

"I think English is one of the few languages that does distinguish between genders with pronouns," I said. "I speak Chinese, and we also just use the one third-person pronoun for everyone."

"Exactly. How do you break down that gap between the structure versus what you really feel? [It loops] back to the concept of othering. You fear what you don't know. So how do I close that gap? How do you know someone, really know them, without being too invasive? For lack of a better word, I'd [call it] racism, but it's very nuanced in how

people other you." Oscar's predicament pointed to the discontinuity of embodying diasporic identity within the dominant culture's way of life. This gulf is buttressed by language, which enforces, contextualizes, and restricts our very ability to identify and make sense of ourselves in terms that speak to us.

"There's this phrase that is really popular amongst [the writing mentorship program I'm in]," Oscar said. "We always say, 'How can we fuck with language?' Just finding ways to fuck with language, figuring out new ways of writing." The writers' program Oscar mentioned took place at Centre A, a collective of and space for Asian Canadian artists in Sun Wah Centre of Vancouver's Chinatown, with a gallery for art installations and a small library of relevant Asian Canadian literature, including issues of publications like *Ricepaper Magazine*. In late 2022 the Vancouver Black Library (VBL), a library and gathering space organized by and for young people of colour to address the violent absence of community spaces for Black people in Vancouver, was founded by organizers (headed by Maya Preshyon) in the same building. Canton Sardine, an art gallery founded by Chinese artists and curators on the basement level of the building, hosted the developing VBL although the library was still in the fundraising stage at the time of our walking interview. Oscar decided to take me to visit Centre A and continued to expound on the questions of legibility that participating in the program had raised for him as we walked.

Taken in Canton Sardine

"We are trying to navigate the art scene with our background [as] Asian Canadian[s], so it's a lot of discussion on how to— or whether you should— avoid the trap of being tokenized as an Asian immigrant," he said. "I find that I do tend to be more apologetic for my background. I try to explain things more, when just a small explanation could suffice. I try to bring the outsider into my reading. We are discussing this concept of impenetrability. When you write something, you write it in your language, right? Do you have to put a footnote and explain it to someone? Or do you just keep it as is? It's a lot of trying to get out of that apologetic behaviour and trying to be more unapologetic, to take a stand and be like, 'This is how I write. I write this in Bengali. If you don't understand, you can look it up, you know. I'm not going to explain what this means.' A

lot of past conditioning hinders me from doing that. But that's why I'm so grateful for the program, because it's helping me navigate through that."

Although Oscar referred to "language" in the literal sense, I couldn't help internalizing his words — *you write it in your language* — to mean something more abstract and personal. Vuong (2016) conceptualizes writing as a bridge of language connecting writer and reader, and

> language belongs to all of us. If I enjoy a poem, that just means I am recognizing within it something of myself, something I must already possess… I really believe that writing is the closest thing we have to true magic. Where else, but in words, can we discover each other out of thin air?

When we write in our own languages, we use tools and ideas fashioned from the landscapes of individual lives which vary greatly yet evolve convergently enough to recognize certain geological features in one another. Oscar brought up a Japanese mentee he worked with in the program, who had shared an essay about how she only spoke English in professional settings and not in personal contexts. The association of the English language with professionalization came to form her "identity of English as a language, to the point where she doesn't feel worthy enough to talk about herself in English. Until this program, she was never able to explore her *self* through English." Here, the tensions between language and labour (both professional and artistic) caused this writer to compartmentalize the self with language as the divider. In other words, the bridge Vuong described was closed to her and language effectively left her marooned.

Tsing (2015:34) observes that no self-contained units, individuals, and interests can assure themselves oblivious to the encounter— and the absence of this self-containment makes way for "a rush of troubled stories" in our knowledge practices. Acts of translation across social and political spaces (in the sense of both language and "other forms of partial attunement"), while making the accumulation of wealth possible (Tsing 2015:62), also make visible the gaps alienating the relationships that hold together these world-making projects. In almost every interview I conducted, the problem of translation emerged organically. Vancouver poet Isabella Wang wrote on Twitter, "Readers, especially white readers, are not entitled to footnotes/explanations/direct translations of

non-English words," and received a barrage of outraged responses which, as some commenters pointed out, would not likely be directed at poets who incorporate languages like French or Greek (Sol 2022). The demand to be included and in the know, for meaning to be readily available, recalls Graeber's (2012) idea that the powerful habitually leave the powerless to do the interpretive work necessary to bridge the empathetic gap between them.

This may be part of what informs the anxieties my interlocutors expressed about language and translation, which they offered when I asked them how they think about their audience as writers and artists. Virginia was critical of using Chinese characters in English writing in the previous chapter. But Jane, who does employ Chinese characters strategically in her writing, conveyed her worries about how readers, especially people who don't know Chinese, evaluate this kind of writing and how her anxieties change the way she feels about her own work. When white readers claim to be excluded by the illegibility of English work that integrates "othered" languages, they demonstrate that they are accustomed to legibility— or, rather, accustomed to having things made legible for them— without consciously registering the interpretive labour that generates this legibility.

Adam Sol (2022), a poet and reviewer, wrote briefly about the responses to Wang's post in an essay about a different poet's work: "Underneath the knee-jerk reactions is an important question about clarity in poems. How much of a poem should be available to us at first reading? What does it suggest when poets deliberately use language that they know will be foreign to many of their readers?" The uncertainty of what one is searching for when reading a poem makes it easy to grasp for answers to questions one hasn't bothered to raise. For Sol (2022), it's an important and meaningful experience as a reader to be able to follow the curiosities, questions, and gestures the poet leaves — rather than getting all the answers on a first reading. As James Baldwin (1984) says, "The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out. But something forces you to anyway." For example, Wang's poetry thematically concerns loss of language. Because of this,

> part of what makes her poems' use of Mandarin interesting is that she herself is no longer as fluent as she'd like to be, so the way some of the characters remain untranslated suggests the same sort of disorientation that her poem's speaker is faced with in the language that she is supposed to feel is her own. It's a demonstration of distance that we are compelled to share with her. In other words, the confusion is part of the point. (Sol 2022)

Naming things in another language, especially a forgotten one, interrupts psychic space and creates both absences which can be read as openings. In another example, Moretti writes about migration, memory, and how forgetting punctures the container of that psychic space— though in her case it is about her use of Italian when she forgets English:

> It is with the Italian name of these things that my thoughts are interrupted once more and trip, as if stumbling over a little edge. The Italian names comes in handy when I forget my English words, and it is in this forgetting, in this reaching for words, that a space is made for remembering. (2021:30)

Just as without precarity there is no privilege, the distance of forgetting is required to hear the echo of remembering.

Maxine described the difficulties of getting the meaning of what she'd like to say across that bridge to the reader in her editorial process. "When I can't find the exact words that I want to say [in a draft poem], I try to use images in their place. And hopefully with time, the words come later. I see that in some of the poems that I read— the poet obviously has a very clear idea in their mind, but it's not translating to me. I feel like I have that same problem, which is why I [use] the images. Sometimes my friends read my poetry and they're like, 'I don't know what this means.' And I'm like, 'Isn't it clear?'

"I had written a poem about walking on the beach [in Vancouver] and relating it to my very limited experiences of walking on the beach in the Philippines, [where I'm from]. But that comparison either didn't come off clearly or was a little bit too cheesy for the person reading it. Something that I want to do — I saw this in a tweet [from a poet I admire] — is to be able to say so much in so few words. [It's] not just [about] limiting how many words that you write, but being able to select images that really evoke something for your reader. It doesn't have to be the exact thing that evokes for you."

Taken at English Bay Beach

"One thing that I realized was that it's actually okay if not the same thing is evoked for the reader as it is for me," Maxine said, "because it's in those [differences] that my writing might resonate with somebody [and] come alive for people in different ways. I think about that, for example, when I read Indigenous poets like Selina Boan, [who's also based in Vancouver]— I obviously don't share the same cultural experience, but the poem still resonates for me in a certain way. I think about that, too, for when people who are not Filipino read my work. Even though it doesn't spark the same kind of image or experience for different people, it's still meaningful in different ways. So yeah, I think that's why I [use those] images— because it allows for [multiplicity in interpretation]." For Maxine, "it's a challenge" to negotiate these gaps in understanding as both a reader and a writer, but it's also what "makes poetry really interesting for [her]."

Oscar confessed that, "Prior to the [Asian Canadian writing] program, I kind of had this impression that my audience was just going to be people like me." According to Oscar, thinking about his audience in context helped him to "clarify this apologetic

behaviour" he carried around, thinking through why he feels both a need and an aversion to overexplaining himself and his art.

Maxine continued talking about her poem about Philippine and Vancouver beaches. "I think [for] a non-Filipino reader, that kind of poem would make even less sense, because the intended reader in my head is not them. [The poem] veers more toward 'I'm writing this to fellow people who grew up in the diaspora'— whereas other poems I write are more open. I think what would make them different is partly the use of language, like how many terms I would use in Tagalog versus in English. But more than just the usage of language, I think the references and the experiences being evoked are more specific. So they may or may not resonate with other people. But I feel like there's like an air to it that this poem is not really for you. And that's okay."

Using other languages in their English work isn't the only way participants "fuck with language." Virginia commented, "My grasp of my mother tongue of Chinese has really saturated my work. It's given me avenues to think about language differently, and to use it in more unintuitive ways and patterns. I'm fluent in Chinese; I love trashy dramas from East Asia; I love C-dramas and Mando-pop. I think in many ways, being part of two linguistic communities just opens up the capacity to explore and expand artistically." She went on to talk about how "just being able to appreciate different modes of art, like Chinese calligraphy [and classical Chinese musical instruments]"— both of which Virginia practices— is illuminating for her, because "people just don't know how to appreciate [them], and it takes a lot of work to even know how to appreciate [them]. That ability is really wonderful to me.

"When I was writing as a teenager, I was writing like a white boy. The poetic voice [was] masculine and white— Willian Carlos Williams, Edgar Allan Poe. [So I was like], got it. To be a poet, you have to have a white voice." Virginia expanded on how fundamentally the conventions of Western fiction, poetry, and fantasy and their visibly limited ways of treating viewpoints that are important to people marginalized from them (particularly with regard to women and people of colour) shaped her approach to the creative arts in response. "Fantasy reflects white people's anxieties. When aliens invade,

they always invade white people. And some people think it's because white people have anxieties about being the subjugated… It goes beyond wanting to see myself represented in media. It also goes into wanting to take my concerns, or narratives I care about, seriously.

"I see dumbasses claim that one day our [ability] to translate will be so advanced that it will no longer be [necessary] to learn new languages. I'm like, 'Have fun trying to appreciate art in another language— have fun trying to enjoy poetry that's been translated.' It's just not possible— I think having these cultural diversities is really [valuable] for artistic development. I see philosophers who train in Greek and Roman classics be like, 'Oh, India had epistemologists too? I've never heard of that.' And I'm like, 'You're so uneducated. Look me in the face and tell me you think you're a cultured man. You're just not well-versed in the canon— and I know you don't think Asian philosophies belong in the canon, but you're just racist.' So I even want to claim that having a global perspective on the way we approach art and history and these wonderful things in life is good for the artistic enjoyer and consumer."

This perspective benefits not just the underrepresented, according to Virginia; it also opens any "artistic enjoyer" to ways of appreciating, for example, the English language. Reflecting on studies abroad in France and backpacking across Europe, Virginia realized that "being in an Anglophone world where English is broadly [used] is really helpful [for creative expression]. You find bigger, more pluralistic communities. That's a wonderful thing about English in particular— it's very receptive to neologisms and cultural differences, [which] is not true for a lot of other European or Western languages. English is really great as an artistic medium for those reasons, even though it's rhyme-poor, the grammar is shit, and it's not particularly beautiful as a language. It's remarkably receptive to new things."

Maxine and Virginia both illustrate how cultural and linguistic versatility lends the ability to open the self, in a process that recalls the liminal bodies in Vuong's poetry, to new ways of engaging with art. My participants clarify that they do not passively

absorb the contexts to which they were displaced; instead, they find alternative routes to make sense of identity that wouldn't have been available to them if not for displacement.

The messiness they describe in managing tensions between writer and reader, between art and audience, reminds me of Tsing's theory of contamination. One metaphor Tsing (2015) employs to explain her use of assemblages in this theory is polyphony—music in which autonomous melodies intertwine—which tends to sound archaic to modern listeners accustomed to rhythms cooperating to support an individual melody. Music of the classical era that superseded baroque madrigals and fugues, like the ones we know Bach for, held a "unified coordination of time" (Tsing 2015:23) as the goal. Tsing (2015) boldly theorizes story as a method with contaminated diversity as its research object and the indeterminate encounter as its unit of analysis. Ursula K. Le Guin (1979) put it poignantly when she wrote that

> [a]s you read a book word by word and page by page, you participate in its creation, just as a cellist playing a Bach suite participates, note by note, in the creation, the coming-to-be, the existence, of the music. And, as you read and re-read, the book of course participates in the creation of you, your thoughts and feelings, the size and temper of your soul.

If our encounters with each other contaminate and change us as we make way for others and make worlds in the process, as Tsing (2015) posits, then storytelling is a kind of polyphony.

In this sense, story is an encounter made up of encounters, not in fixity but in its telling and reiteration and reception, encompassing not only the writer and the reader but also the necessary encounters of language, life, and memory that infuse the ideas and images which make the text and its interpretation. Stories, especially when considered in multiplicity, interrupt and draw attention to that which cannot be made scalable and precise, creating more questions than they can— or want to, or attempt to— answer. As a method, they move us and move with us, attenuating us to the rhythm of conflict and the cacophony of ruin. In this research, I aimed to bring encounters with my interlocutors together in "a rush of stories," and in the process of trying to extract a line of meaning

from these encounters, they revealed their resistance to "nest[ing] neatly" (Tsing 2015:37) within one another.

But it was in these resistances that I found meaning. Consider the way Maxine meditated on the discrepancies and uncertainties in her poetic and cultural encounters as units of significance, or the way Oscar arbitrated his gendered encounters in the professional West, or the differing ways in which Virginia and Jane approached encounters with linguistic transgression. The woman from the Brooklyn loft party, the woman who helped Vuong with his university ID, and the elementary school teacher who accused him of plagiarism may have long forgotten their awkward encounters with Vuong— but they live on as language and alchemize in his writing to become a form of knowledge. Graeber's concept of interpretive labour further conduces this assemblage by helping to explain on a micro level what occurs at these encounters. The intertextual stories these encounters form draw "attention to interrupting geographies and tempos" (Tsing 2015:37) and extends the capacities of Asian diasporic identity.

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Conclusion

This thesis argues that Asian diasporic cultural production, beyond its representational value, is a manifestation of affective migrant home-building that contributes to our understanding of the Asian diaspora in Canada and the US as a community with a distinct identity. The contents of the thesis have shown that participants interpreted and shaped identity by engaging in several forms of intellectual labour.

The first chapter established the importance of memory and the senses as processes that diasporic writers draw on to better understand their own relationships with place, time, and belonging. The concepts of echoes and haunting offer an explanation for how interacting with the sensory world around them allows diasporic writers to pull "the past 'home' of another time and another space" (Hage 2010:422) into their present imaginaries. This transit marks diasporic memory and cultural production as unique in their relationship with time and space.

The second chapter expounded on storytelling as a method of collective identity formation. The communal aspect of storytelling is particularly imminent for migrant cultural producers, who struggle to gain a sense of belonging in the diaspora where they are disempowered by cultural illegibility. This disempowerment shapes Asian diasporic identity and how writers understand their own legibility relative to dominant groups. They use linguistic and creative interventions to negotiate legibility and engage affective kinship between others in the diaspora, facilitating the ability to practice home-building, a sense of shared culture, and a sense of shared identity.

The third and final chapter probed into how participants and other Asian diasporic writers navigate identity in intellectual institutions where they are expected to carry out the interpretive labour of making themselves and their work legible to others. The demand for legibility and meaning to be readily extractable from marginalized creators' work recalls Graeber's (2012) notion that the powerful habitually leave the powerless to do the interpretive work necessary to bridge the empathetic gap between them.

Negotiating legibility in these spaces depends on possession of a working knowledge of how power moves within them.

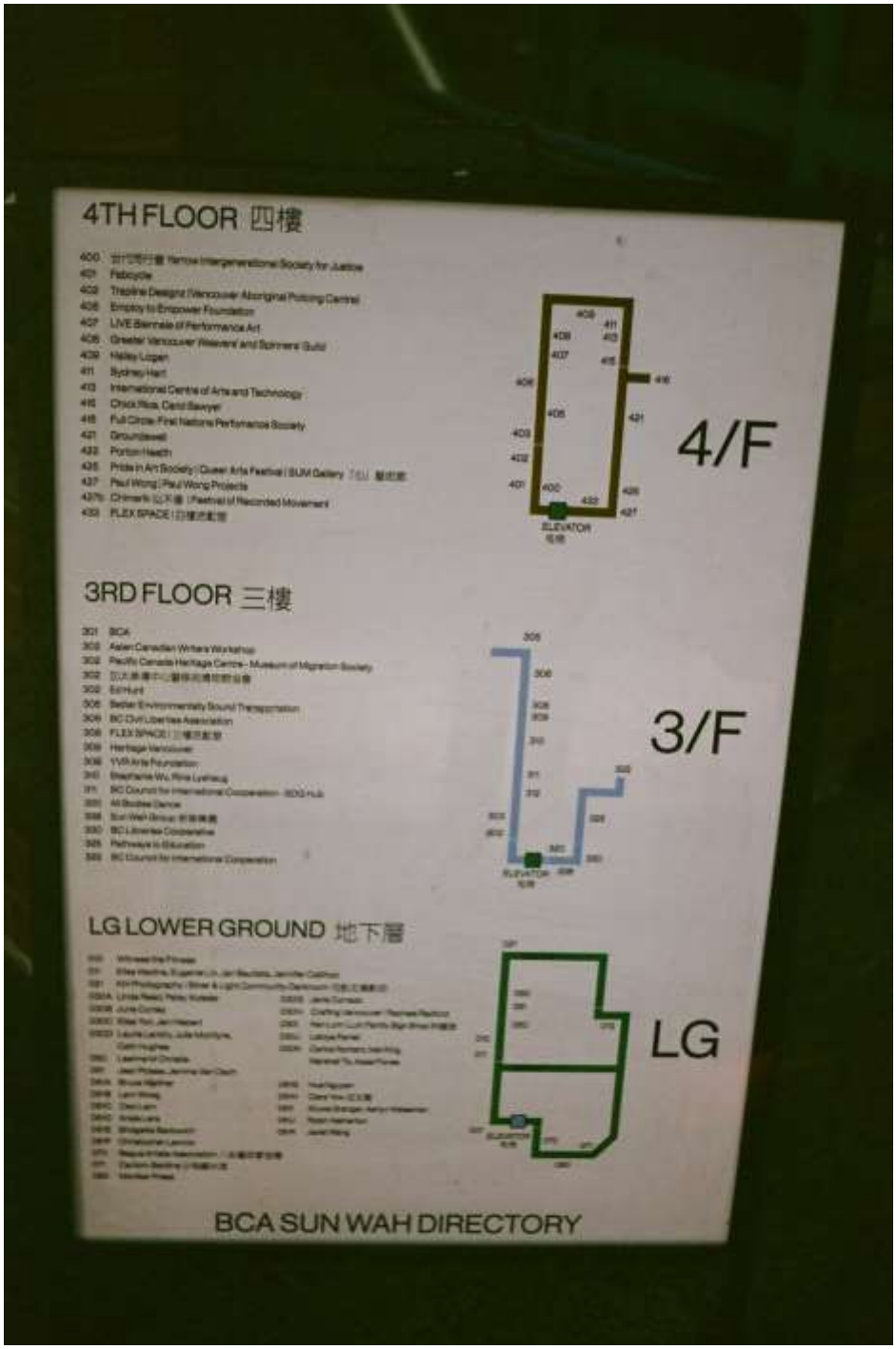
Far from being passive observers of these dynamics, participants resist institutional limits and exclusions; they transgress artistic expectations. They demonstrate that Asian diasporic cultural production has distinctive qualities that set it apart as a form of knowledge of its own. The skilled intellectual labour that goes into creating work, socially navigating institutions, and generating a sense of identity does not happen unbidden. In circumstances of unbelonging and unfamiliarity, participants had to find alternative ways to go about this work—ways that would not have been immediately available to them if not for their displacement. Asian diasporic cultural production and intellectual labour therefore afford the ability to open boundaries of racial identity and cultural community to new possibilities.

Appendix A.

Photos from Maxine's Interview

Appendix B.

Photos from Oscar's Interview


4TH FLOOR 四樓
400 Yarrow Intergenerational Society for Justice
401 Pidocycle
402 Trapline Designz | Vancouver Aboriginal Policing Centre
406 Employ to Empower Foundation
407 LIVE Biennale of Performance Art
408 Greater Vancouver Weavers' and Spinners' Guild
409 Hailey Logan
411 Sydney Hart
413 International Centre of Arts and Technology
415 Chick Rice, Carol Sawyer
416 Full Circle: First Nations Performance Society
421 Groundswell
422 Portion Health
425 Pride in Art Society | Queer Arts Festival | SUM Gallery 下以 屬於您
427 Paul Wong | Paul Wong Projects
427b Chimerik 以不像 | Festival of Recorded Movement
430 FLEX SPACE | 口場所實驗
ELEVATOR
4/F
3RD FLOOR 三樓
301 BCA
303 Asian Canadian Writers Workshop
304 Pacific Canada Heritage Centre - Museum of Migration Society
305 Ed Hunt
306 Better Environmentally Sound Transportation
309 BC Civil Liberties Association
308 FLEX SPACE | 口場所實驗
309 Heritage Vancouver
308 YVR Arts Foundation
310 Brad Fannie Wu, Rina Lyshkaug
311 BC Council for International Cooperation - SDG Hub
320 All Bodies Dance
328 Sun Wah Group 新華集團
330 BC Libraries Cooperative
325 Pathways to Education
329 BC Council for International Cooperation
ELEVATOR
3/F
LG LOWER GROUND 地下層
LG
BCA SUN WAH DIRECTORY

As if coming over lifetimes,
the first encounter was familiar.

Out of rhythm and breath at first, the body unravelled, fractured;
it merged, became, and mutated with the earth, water, and air.

I have been returning ever since,
with and without a body.

Aware and willing,
I offered myself to the ravaged, burning world;
knowing that your presence is a مريم.

I surrender
to your wisdom and crevices;
to the imbalance of and in the world.
Looking, instead, on the inside,
for balance and synchronicity.

Knowing that your marks and spaces will shift,
that they will soon cease to exist,
and the abyss will come rushing in,

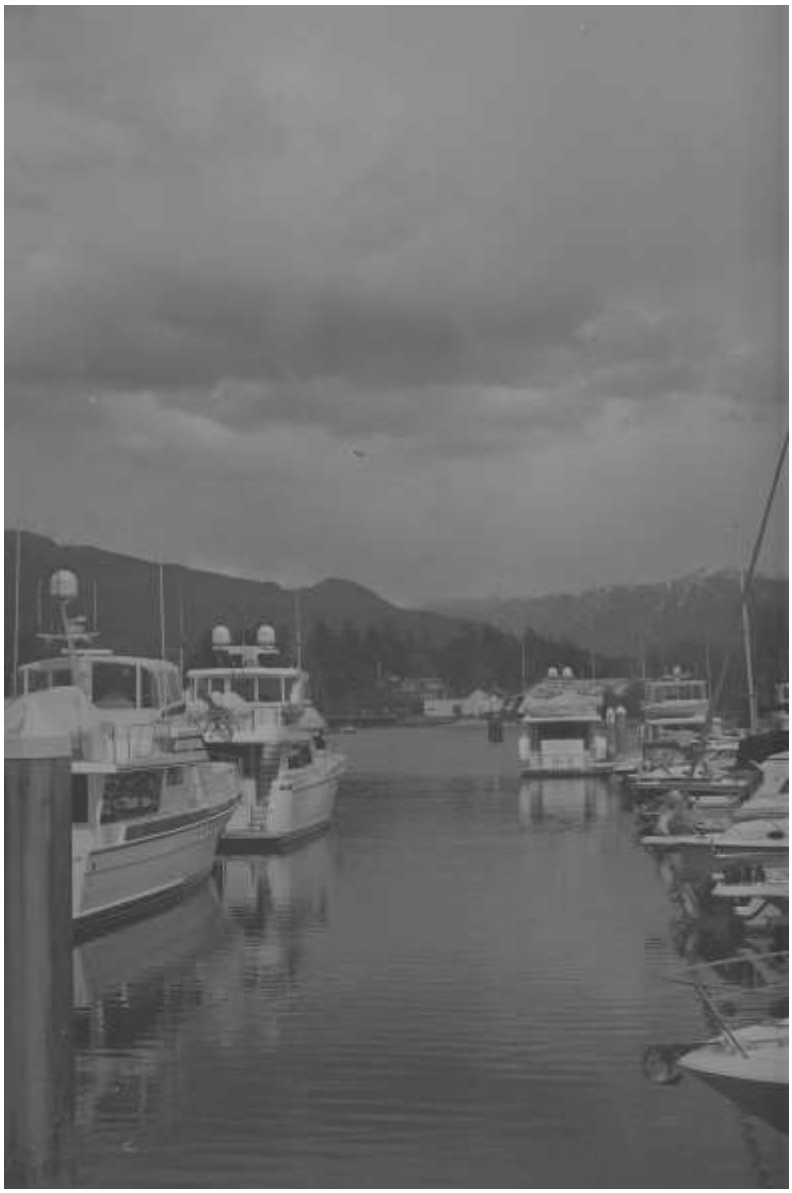
I still surrender.


QUEER DIDACTIC PRONOUN POPO
FORCE WHILE
OLDER
JOIN THE
LESBIANS
COUNT LOOSE CHANGE
CAN'T
COVER BASICS


ALIVE

Appendix C.

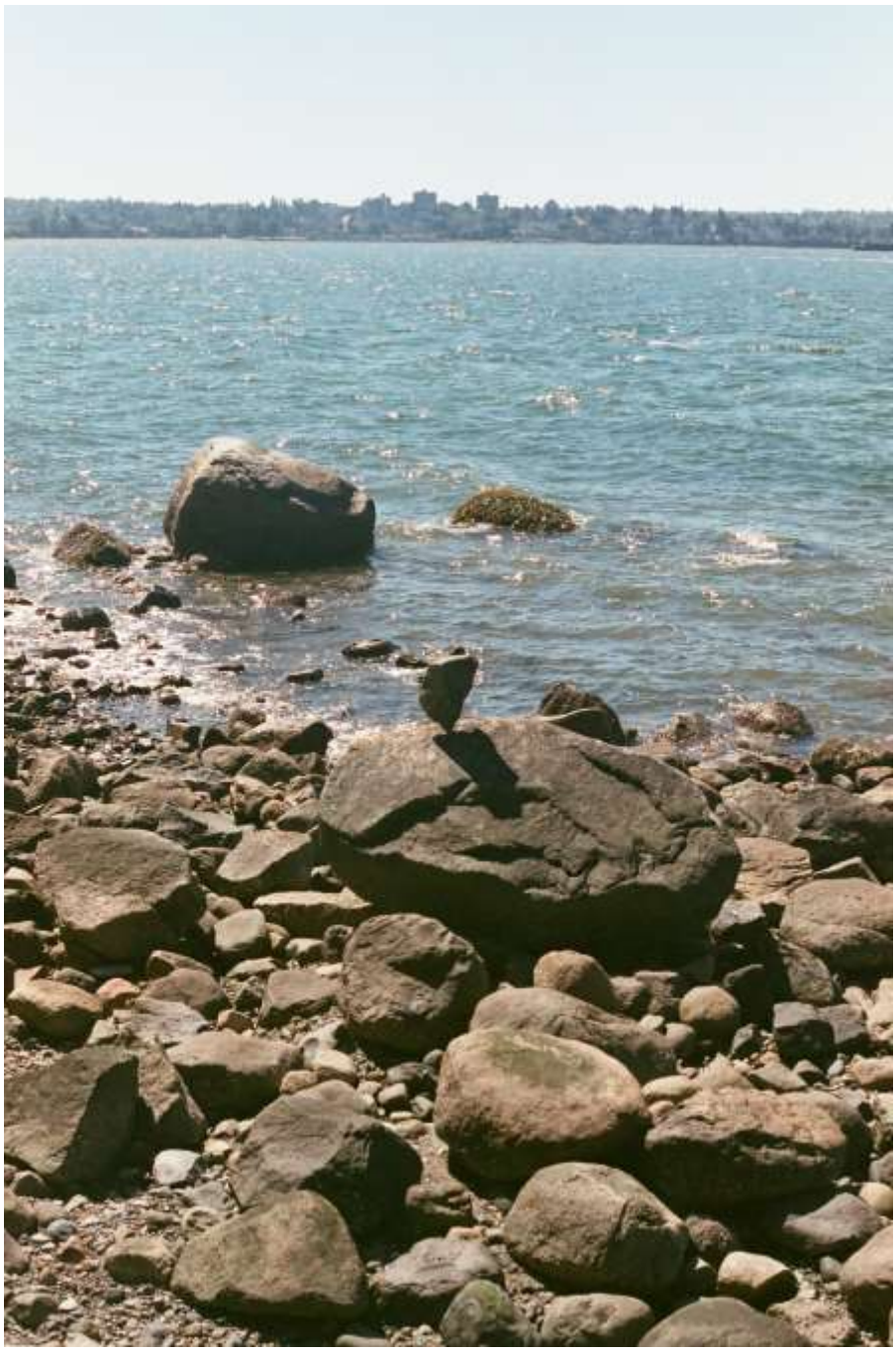
Photos from Virginia's Interview




MAGIC SPIRIT

Appendix D.

Photos from Allen's Interview



Appendix E.

Photos from Louisa's Interview


The Source
ANTIQUES
British Pub Furnishings
PARKING AT REAR
HOSTEL
Cobalt
Motor
Hotel