



5-4-2016

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Benzi Zhang

Shanghai University of Political Science and Law

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.25.10>

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Recommended Citation

Zhang, Benzi (2016) "The Poetics of Transnational Life: Writing Identity across Borders," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 25 , Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.25.10>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol25/iss1/11>

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The Poetics of Transnational Life: Rethinking Identity Across Borders

Benzi Zhang

SHANGHAI UNIVERSITY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND LAW

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational.
Homi Bhabha, "Freedom's Basis in the Indeterminate"

The global flows of immigration that overcome spatial and temporal distance/separation have created the effects of "time-space compression" and made possible "simultaneous transactions which sustain deterritorialized cultures."¹ In light of the shrinking of the globe, we need to reformulate the earlier conceptions and paradigms of national belonging that are no longer adequate to describe the change of our sense of identity in its relationship to the global/local interaction. As mutual penetration between different cultures has dramatically increased, we need to explore the consequences of transnational interaction upon the production of immigrant identity across cultural and national boundaries. In an age of cultural diversity and transnational globality, Asian immigrants in the United States, with their ethnic vacillation and cultural ambivalence, demonstrate that different national elements may merge in a process of cultural trans-relation, which challenges the force of singular national dominance by relocating the site of identity articulation in a discursive domain of plural interrelationships. Immigrants, in the process of crossing and re-crossing the borders of space, time, race, language, culture, and politics, translate and transform a static historical identity into a dynamic asynchronous transcultural entity. Although the notion of national identity is by no means outdated, there are new pressures being put on the re-defining of transnational and transcultural subjectivities exerted by the increased global/local interactions in many fields of human activities. In this context, the study of immigrant identity must move beyond the quasi-geographical boundaries into new dynamic systems of politics, economics, and culture, which are not "co-existent with the borders of nation-states."²

Transnational Passage and Borderzone Condition

The transfer of peoples and cultures from all over the world to the United States has generated an intricate transnationality and cultural globality, which are based upon the tension of interstices and overlaps of different national cultures. In a sense, the crossing of a geopolitical border is the least important aspect of immigrant experience in view of the long process of adjusting to a new society. Despite their shared cultural heritages, Asian immigrants in the United States exhibit differing attitudes towards their immigrant experiences: Some favor mutual assimilation and acculturation, while others advocate

cultural distinctness and separateness. The assimilation vs. separation dilemma and the problem of identity in relation to their old and new “homes” have created a tension between the two homes and a kind of spatial-temporal duality that defines their self-conception. As Marilyn Chin, one of the leading authors of Asian immigrant communities, describes in a poem, the emotional, cultural, and psychological identification is often related to the difference, distance, and dislocation shaped by her experience of crossing over from the East to the West:

My shadow followed me to San Diego
silently, she never complained.
No green card, no identity pass,
she is wedded to my fate.³

Born in Hong Kong, Marilyn Chin immigrated to the United States with her family and translocated herself from one sociocultural sphere into another, where she became “an other.” Her poetry reconstructs her immigrant experience and expresses the determination of her family to survive and to move forward in the new world: “Upon entering the world— / there would be no return. / Upon treading the path— / there would be no detours.”⁴ The passage into a completely new social environment, as Chin says in an interview, has tremendous impact upon her sense of identity, generating “two sides of the integral self,” which implicate a kind of “double consciousness” of her transnational inheritance.⁵ The two sides of self, like yin/yang duality, produce a tension as well as a dynamic interaction that vivifies the complexity of immigrant identity. For Chin, immigration involves not only the “out-of- country” movement, but also the “out-of-culture,” “out-of-language,” and “out-of-oneself” experiences. The multifold out-of-border journeys over various discursive and nondiscursive domains—linguistic, cultural, national, political and economic—have transformed “a single time ... into multiple spaces and tempos.”⁶

In popular media as well as in social discourse, immigrants are often represented as strangers from elsewhere who, without a sense of belonging, never feel at home in a new country, yet are unable to return to their homeland. As Iain Chambers observes, “cut off from the homelands of tradition, experiencing a constantly challenged identity, the stranger is perpetually required to make herself at home in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present.”⁷ In this predicament, the “historical inheritance” and the “heterogeneous present” are translated into a transnational discourse, which means both border-crossing and border-redefining in spatial and temporal domains. Constantly traveling along various routes, immigrants have to revise their identities through mediation of different cultural dwellings. It seems that immigrants have to situate themselves constantly in a cross-cultural and transnational mediation; and they have to learn how to reposition themselves in a new relationship between their current residences and their previous homes. This repositioning, as Julia Kristeva observes, serves as a necessary strategy to “live with the others, to live as others.”⁸ Moreover, since immigrants develop multiple relationships that cross and span cultural and national borders, the trajectories of their identities, as a result, would occupy no singular national space but are situated in a web of social, economic, and cultural links encompassing both global and local practices. The complexities and ambivalence associated with the flows of immigration have created a transnational mode of life across cultures and a kind of spatiotemporal duality between different nations.

Immigration involves not only the crossing of geopolitical borders, but also the traversing of multiple boundaries and barriers in culture and history. Although Asian immigrants in the United States vary in terms of their original cultural and national backgrounds, they all face the same problem of how to articulate their “historical inheritance” in a “heterogeneous present.” In the drama of immigration, the historical experience of border-crossing, without a doubt, can be viewed in a positive light. As Edward Said

remarks, while “most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home,” immigrants and exiles “are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is *contrapuntal*.”⁹ With his unusual insight of paradox, Said contends that “borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.”¹⁰ However, one convulsive consequence of “breaking barrier of thought and experience,” which Said does not elaborate on adequately, is the crisis of identity that immigrants may encounter and endure in the process of border-crossing that transforms static, singular identity into shifting, multiple ones. Immigration, which opens up new spaces for cross-cultural negotiation, also creates radical effects of dislocation upon identity articulation. The complexities and ambivalence associated with immigration have posed a tremendous challenge for identity analysis, for identity should be singular by nature in “being what the others are not,” but immigrant experience has transformed identity into a paradoxical measure of “more than one/no more one” that contrapuntalizes multiple selves and subjectivities.

After relocating themselves in a new society and culture, immigrants must face various political, economic and cultural forces that threaten their sense of identity as a fixed, pure, and closed structure, which has been uprooted from its original territory by their border-crossing experiences. In the process of immigration, as mutual penetration between the local and the global discourse is intensified, the elements of different nations may mingle in a network of transnational passages, which challenges the force of a singular national domination by repositioning the site of identity articulation at the intersections of various cultural crossings. Due to their new awareness of racial and ethnic issues intensified by their experiences in America, a large number of Asian immigrants attempt to translate cultural conflicts and ambiguities into expressions of new identities over differences. As Chin describes in her poem “How I Got That Name”:

I am Marilyn Mei Ling Chin.
 Oh, how I love the resoluteness
 of that first person singular
 followed by that stalwart indicative
 of “be,” without the uncertain i-n-g
 of “becoming.” Of course,
 the name had been changed
 somewhere between Angel Island and the sea,
 when my father the person
 in the late 1950s
 obsessed with a bombshell blonde
 transliterated “Mei Ling” to “Marilyn.”¹¹

Chin’s poem suggests a process of combining two cultural artifacts, but the translation of “Mei Ling” into “Marilyn” demonstrates that neither of the cultures is sufficient to provide a fully realized identity. With an awkward name of English and Chinese compound, Marilyn Chin feels that she is caught up in the middle, a borderzone where different national and cultural discourses crisscross and overlap. “I am a contradiction in terms,” as she says.¹² Deployed as a description of cultural overlay, the metaphor of borderzone refers to a site “where crisscrossed identities are forged out of the debris of corroded, formerly (would-be) homogeneous identities.”¹³ Borderzone challenges the myth of homogeneity of singular nationhood with an emphasis on the interaction between different cultures. It opens up new spaces of cultural multiplicity in which the extra-national elements are embedded in the expressions of national-

ty. In Chambers's words, immigrant identity is "articulated across the hyphen, the transition, the bridge or passage between, rather than firmly located in any one culture, place or position."¹⁴

Over the past few decades, a wide range of strategies for mapping the configurations of immigrant identity has been established based upon the border theories developed by Gloria Anzaldúa, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, among others. "Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity," as Anzaldúa maintains, "is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element."¹⁵ Borderzone, however, does not mean the disappearance of national boundaries, but rather highlights the complex dimensions of a nation between and beyond various outside and inside borders. Nation, in other words, should be considered as a dynamic body of translocal interrelationships, where different cultural passages contest singular teleology by admitting foreignness and otherness within national discourses. Moreover, borderzone may not necessarily produce an entity of smooth hybridization, but instead it enacts a "mutual mirroring" process, to borrow a phrase from Wolfgang Iser, in which "different cultures are enacted under mutually alien conditions."¹⁶ The articulation of immigrant identity would be neither a simple combination of different cultural elements nor an assertion of difference as an end in itself, but a process of transnational interaction that integrates differences into a decentralized sense of co-belonging. The complicity of co-belonging, which develops on constantly changing configurations of diversity and unity, "is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity."¹⁷ The politics of borderzone constitutes a transnational condition, which embraces the complexity associated with cultural differences in articulations of identity and includes otherness in the discourse of the self. It not only acknowledges otherness in one's self-invention but also presents a gesture to recognize cultural overlay that embraces extra or extra-national dimensions of one's identity.

Asian immigrants in the United States are conventionally designated as "Asian American," and this naming, so to speak, should define an identity with Americanness *plus* Asian characteristics. Ironically, however, the *plus* also implicates simultaneously the experience of a *minus*—that is, the lack of both Asian and American potentiality, since Asian immigrants are not fully American yet less Asian than those who live in the Far East. While "Asian America" is supposed to be a *part* of both Asia and America, it turns out to be *apart* from either side. The paradoxical situation of in-betweenness, as Aihwa Ong points out, means "that there is a new mode of constructing identity, as well as new modes of subjectification that cut across political borders."¹⁸ The ever increasing transnational mobility in both political and economic terms has destabilized the performances of self and seeks recognition of new identities outside the conventional logic of nationality. In an era of globalization, different nations have permeated into one another's spaces, but mutual penetration does not always work in harmony. Caught between different sociocultural systems that cannot be fully integrated into either one, immigrants are engaged in a constant negotiation between two worlds which in turn produces ambiguous identities that contain elements of foreignness, otherness, and something recognizably different. "By explicitly, obviously, ostensibly occupying the place of the difference," as Julia Kristeva observes, "the foreigner challenges both the identity of the group and his own—a challenge that few among us are apt to take up."¹⁹ In this sense, integration of otherness into identity does not mean to find equivalence in different cultures for substitution, but to expand the space of continuity in which various configurations of relations can be formed. Immigrant identity, therefore, accepts the increasing complexity in self-invention without reducing it to rigid national structures.

In history, different nations invariably maintain an exclusivist paradigm, regarding one another as "savage" or "barbarian"; and the mutual demonization implicates unconscious psychological borders that were established to exclude the foreigners. During the Enlightenment, as Kristeva points out, the savage or stranger was nothing but "the alter ego of the philosopher"; "The foreigner then becomes the

figure onto which the penetrating, ironical mind of the philosopher is delegated—his double, his mask.”²⁰ Kristeva also argues that we are all foreigners once we are conscious of our differences. Thus, the recognition of our own differences transforms foreignness into commonality, “promoting the togetherness of those foreigners that we all recognize ourselves to be.”²¹ Due to different regimes of sociopolitical domination, immigrants may face the process of foreignization in which they become “the Other,” “the foreigners,” or “the barbarians,” but the condition of “togetherness” in modern society is based on the awareness of differences that we are all foreign and different. As Marilyn Chin describes in her poem:

The barbarians are coming: they have red beards or beardless
with a top knot.

The barbarians are coming: they are your fathers, brothers,
teachers, lovers; and they are clearly an other.²²

As an epistemological construct, the stereotyped quality of barbarianness is generated along with the numerous borders of racial, national, and cultural differences. In the case of Asian immigrants, their experiences of being foreignized in a new society push them into a position for self-reexamination. “At such a historic juncture,” as Wolfgang Iser notes, “a cross-cultural discourse begins to emerge,” which is “motivated by the need to cope with a crisis that can no longer be alleviated by the mere assimilation or appropriation of other cultures.”²³ Although immigrants may cross borders in different ways for different purposes, they all have to renegotiate their “foreignness” or “barbarianness” in the interstitial cultural spaces.

Immigration involves not only the crossover of geopolitical borders, but also the traverse of multiple ideological and cultural divides. In the late 20th Century, all forms of belonging cannot be exclusively nationalistic, and the configurations of national belonging must be deployed in transnational networks that accommodate multiple cultural attachments. For immigrants, the experience of being the same and different simultaneously suggests a paradoxical transposition between different cultural frames. In this sense, immigration can be seen as a transgressive journey which, on the one hand, crosses borders to challenge outside limits in space and, on the other hand, disrupts the status quo of inside comfort zones of nations. Moreover, as Abdul JanMohamed argues, immigrants are not “‘sitting’ on the border; rather, they are forced to *constitute themselves as the border*,” since “the border only functions as a mirror, as a site of defining the ‘identity’ and ‘homogeneity’ of the group that has constructed it.”²⁴ Immigrant identity, therefore, should be understood as a product of transnational interaction between and beyond borders. This understanding, different from the accounts of identity as unity or as hybridity, suggests that identity is seen to be itself divided and constantly in a dynamic process of interaction whereby various cultural and national presences dislocated from their original places work into new articulations. For immigrants, identity articulation is not a simple combination of different cultural elements, but rather a complex practice that compares and connects different cultural elements in a dynamic process of self-revision.

Cultural Memory and Con-Temporal Relation

If we trace the trajectory of immigrant identity into the border politics, we’d better follow Lawrence Grossberg’s advice not to “view space as passive and determined” or “treat space too empirically”; instead, we should use “spatial vocabularies as figures”—“The figural language functions, often insightfully, to describe everyday life, social relations of power and intellectual work.”²⁵ Although immigrant identity is often described in a “poetic language of travel—of homes, voyages and destinations,” its artic-

ulation is not limited to geopolitical borders. The poetic language of travel, in Grossberg's words, only "reconfigures metonymical systems into synecdochal images of identity."²⁶ What is more, the idea of border should be used not only as a geographic concept, but also as a temporal notion, since borders could be both horizontal between various locations and vertical betwixt different historical dwellings. By mapping immigrant identity in temporal terms, we can transcend the hereditary limitation of territory-determined national identity. Immigrants travel both in space and in time and, as a result, their identity is not only multilocal but con-temporal as well. Con-temporality best describes a kind of untimely identity which, as Stuart Hall observes, is "formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture."²⁷ Hall's remark urges us to reimagine identity as a negotiated endurance among different time vectors; and central to this con-temporality is a paradox of being situated at an unstable point simultaneously within and without the borders of time and history. In addition, the unstable point suggests a loosened structure of identity that subverts the normative system of national imaginary and reconstructs different cultural inheritances into an untimely presence of new nationhood.

In their attempt to articulate their identity, immigrants have to negotiate with different temporalities in relation to their previous cultures. The transgressive journey in time is not merely a sentimental reminiscence, but rather a retrospective movement towards the past and back again. For Asian immigrants, their ancestral homelands are particularly important, because they provide the necessary cultural resources for their development of self-realization and community solidarity. Adrift between different sociocultural spheres that cannot entirely be integrated, Asian immigrants are subject to a negotiational process in which various elements from their cultural memories are reconfigured and repositioned in relation to their current locations. Their nostalgia often draws on the cultural myths, tales, and symbols of ancestral homelands. In Marilyn Chin's poetry we find an eagerness to get access to the deep layers of history for stored cultural values. As her poem "Lost Country" shows:

To love your country
is to know its beginnings
not with the bald-face moon
or the complacent river—
but here within you.

Your heart is a house—
I/we are its inhabitants.
Although the country is lost
rivers and mountains remain.
And we shall always live
in this poetry that you love.²⁸

Chin's poem reverberates with the long tradition of Asian cultural sensibilities, which provides a wide, enriching landscape for the speaker's self-recognition. To reclaim the cultural heritage is to relive it in an imaginative space of the "lost country." The desire to look back at the country that she has left behind infuses much of Chin's poetic work; and the search for her cultural roots is a central focus of her immigrant experience. The juxtaposition of the "lost country" with the speaker's current location seems to suggest a mnemonic journey, which allows her to make connection between the two different worlds that she has experienced. Moreover, Chin's effort to weave Asian traditions into the fabric of his poetic imagination is not merely motivated by a longing to re-inhabit the ancestral past, but rather by her intention to revitalize

and to grapple with the ancient culture as an integral part of her contemporary or, to be exact, con-temporal experience. In the poet's memory, the "lost country" is supposed to be there without actually being there, since its presence is provable everywhere. Crucial to the uneasy con-temporality is a paradox of being situated at an unstable point between the past and the present.

To a certain degree, all immigrants take part of the memory of their original cultures with them. Moving into a new society, their cultural memories continuously speak of other places and other times, which are closely related to their sense of who they are and where they are from. Cultural memory, which is associated not only with the immigrants' emotional experiences but also with their deep-rooted consciousness, provides the foundation for self-understanding. Since the Renaissance times, memory has been considered as "the seat of identity." As William West asserts, "while reason made one human, it was memory that made one a particular individual."²⁹ Today, however, the situation becomes much more complicated for immigrants, since memory implicates not only a seat of their self-recognition, but also a collective realm for cultural preservation in a society where the social system of beliefs and practices constantly efface and erase their traditions. Cultural memory, in other words, involves an ongoing process of identity construction and reconstruction that are shaped by collective efforts to build community solidarity. For immigrants, the term "belonging" indicates trans-relations of cultures in time and space in search for a collective—a new and renewed recognition of the beginning of their community. "The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space," as John R. Gillis notes, "is sustained by remembering."³⁰ It is obvious that traveling back in time is crucial for immigrants to revitalize the flow of their traditions and to redefine the meanings of their identity. As Chin describes:

The beginning is always difficult.
The immigrant worked his knuckles to the bone
only to die under the wheels of the railroad.
One thousand years before him, his ancestor fell
building yet another annex to the Great Wall—
and was entombed with his work. And I,
the beginning of an end, the end of a beginning,
sit here, drink unfermented green tea,
scrawl these paltry lines for you. Grandfather,
on your one-hundredth birthday, I have
the answers to your last riddles...³¹

To explore the richness and complexity of her identity, the speaker travels backward to the beginning of her cultural tradition; and she feels obliged to complete the stories that her ancestors have started and to find answers to historical "riddles" that call for new interpretations. The images of her ancestors who constructed the Great Wall in China and her grandfather who built the railroad in America seem to suggest an immanent bond that determines and describes her cultural inheritance. The meanings of her life are not confined to the time-span of her single existence but are traced back to those untimely moments in history. The poem highlights the historical depths of immigrant identity that is both new and yet conditioned by cultural traditions. The crossover of borders in time and history gives the speaker a transcendent position from which to articulate her identity as part of the dis-articulated history of her ancestry. At the very moment of dislocation, the knowledge of cultural connection is essential for immigrants. Suffering the hardship of dislocation and dismembering, immigrants strive to establish a new sense of belonging that is at once multilocal and con-temporal. It is with the mobile sense of belonging

that Asian immigrants are able to relocate and translocate their identity in a space beyond the spatiotemporal boundaries of nation-states.

For Chin, poetry is a powerful mode of transnational performance, which allows her to reconstruct her identity “in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present.” Since what she regards as her Asian cultural heritage is virtually absent from the American society, Chin has to rely on cultural memory as a means to recapture the fading past and to rebuild connection with her cultural tradition. In her poem “Old Asian Hand,” Chin writes:

Old Asian hand,
touch me where it flutters,
my heart, my body’s butterfly,
one violet camellia,
pulses in the dead of night.

Old Asian hand,
the moon gnaws your left side.
Yellow are the grasses
that never learned to writhe.

Old Asian hand,
below the blue equator, have you discovered
the warm, moist lichen
of early autumn?

Beneath the marl of the new diaspora,
clear water runs.³²

The “old Asian hand” as Chin describes in her poem serves as a condensed image that symbolizes the long tradition of Asian cultures, which soothes her vagrant soul and heals her sense of homelessness. Time and again, the speaker in Chin’s poetry travels to the distant past of Asian civilization to explore the deep dimensions of her identity. For an immigrant poet like Chin, writing about the cultural origin is a strategy of overcoming the sense of rootlessness. As her poetic imagination roams without temporal or spatial restraints, the past is remembered, re-experienced and re-spirited to the present. The spiritual roaming itself is a transnational process of connection and interaction that bridges and abridges different cultural space-times. By linking cultures that are geographically far distant from each other, Chin draws attention to a vast network of human civilization, of which each culture is an indispensable part.

Cultural memory exhibits powerful relational potentiality that extends immigrant identity into a wide space of transnationality; and as a mode of connection, it allows for broader self-knowledge through a synchronic effect of time and place and plays a crucial role in defining the multifaceted components of identity. Asian immigrants’ yearning to remember the past entails an ongoing process of identity recovery and construction. “They need to honor the hidden histories from which they come,” as Stuart Hall observes; “They need to understand and revalue the traditions and inheritances of cultural expression and creativity.”³³ For this reason, memory occupies a significant place within the critical discourses on self-determination, since cultural consciousness is based on collective and individual memories of historical events, traditions, and community life. The engagement with the past is significant not only because it is where memory is nourished but also because it is a site of desire for continuous connection with the

spiritual resources of life. In the processes of cultural dispersal and dislocation, memory provides a wide network for Asian immigrants to associate the past with the present, and the East with the West. To embrace memory means to possess and repossess the cultural traditions which give their identities depth, fluidity, profoundness, and complexity.

Global Network and Post-National Liminality

In history of human civilization, the question of identity is also inevitably tied to the politics of place. As Gaston Bachelard notes, the idea of self stands in close relation to the passion for place—"topophilia"³⁴; and the sense of place has essential significance in the understanding of human identity. Place, however, is not a stable concept, for the notion of place as a bordered realm or a narrowly defined point in space is obviously inadequate to describe the modern flows of immigration in which place has been displaced and opened up to an undelimited system of spacing. Against Bachelard's topoanalysis, scholars in recent years have begun to reconsider the meanings of place in new contexts. Place is no longer regarded as fixed or given, but has to be redrawn and re-negotiated in relation to each instance of cross-cultural interaction. "The ongoing process of disruption and manipulation by global discourses," as Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake point out, is "rearticulated as a process of translating the transnational structurations of nation, self, and community into 'translational,' in-between spaces of negotiated language, borderland being, and bicultural ambivalence."³⁵ Under such circumstances, the configuration of immigrant identity, therefore, depends on translocal linkages that spread beyond the normative structures of nation-states. In the age of modern immigration, it is almost impossible to segregate any local place that does not involve nonlocal or extralocal linkages to a wide network. Furthermore, the dramatic change in the politics of place has blurred the historical opposition of *here* versus *there*, since to a certain extent, *there* has been both merged and emerged in the very characterization of *here*. "It is a sense of place, an understanding to 'its character' which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond," as Doreen Massey observes. "A progressive sense of place would recognize that, without being threatened by it. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of local, a global sense of place."³⁶ Massey's observation, which describes place as a node in a global network of relations, points toward a new "sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local."³⁷ Similarly yet creatively, Chin's poetry expresses new understandings of place from the standpoint of her own self-reflections on the transnational dimensions of modern life:

The same stars come around and around and around
 The same sun peeks her head at the horizon
 The same housing tract, the same shopping center
 The same blunt haircut: Chinese, Parisian, Babylonian
 The same lipstick: red and it comes off on your coffee cup
 The same stars come around and around and around.³⁸

The poem depicts a vision of expansive continuation, which is not confined to a single or singular psycho-cultural locale, but rather it moves from one locale to another to represent a transnational circumnavigation. The concept of place is redefined by the transnational circuitry that allows dispersed populations to connect, converse, and conjoin the essential elements of their social and cultural lives around the world. The parallel expressions implicate a sense of multifariousness and, at the same time, connote a spatiotemporal image that celebrates its own diversity. The poem, in other words, represents a view of paradoxical connection—what might be a discontinuous effect of separate places is more like an im-

pression of close proximity in a global network. It is the global dimension that marks the trajectory of immigrant identity which is constantly repositioned in the unsettling liminality of transnational space and temporality.

It is interesting to note that the landscape of immigration in the United States has dramatically changed in the late 20th Century, as the influx of wealthy immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia has steadily increased. The newcomers, different from the earlier poor immigrants from Asia, are professionals, “developers, financiers, and industrialists who work on both sides of the Pacific.”³⁹ As Aihwa Ong points out, “in addition to being the destination of Third World refugees and migrant workers, U.S. cities are fast becoming the sites of overseas Asian investment and settlement.”⁴⁰ The new type of immigrants is often called “astronauts,” due to the fact that “they spend so much time shuttling back and forth across the Pacific”; and “they are not always as attuned to the cultural norms” of American society “as they are to the transnational opportunities opened up by globalization.”⁴¹ These investor-immigrants, in Ong’s words, are “transnational cosmopolitans” who “strategically manage meaning as they negotiate and contest the shifting discursive terrains in the world economy.”⁴² The transnational mode of their lives, afforded by global capitalism, is characterized by multi-local attachments, dwelling, and traveling across nations. As a result, the new development of immigration invites us to reconsider the meanings of place outside of the boundaries of nation-states, since the poles that we traditionally identify as the local and the global are no longer clear-cut.

Transnational life as exemplified by the new immigrants, who shift back and forth across the Pacific, seems to contradict the conventional notion of national belonging. On the one hand, they are “footloose cosmopolitans” and, on the other hand, their mobility represents an increasing global interconnectedness. What was historically defined as national places has been diluted by international economy and rapid developments of technology. Instead “of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around,” as Doreen Massey notes, “they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings.” Moreover, adds Massey, “a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself.”⁴³ In this sense, Asian immigrants provide an appropriate case for our examination of “out of place” identity—part of America yet not American in an ambiguous zone of transnational locality. In some of her poems, Chin expresses her understanding of place in terms of communicative circuit that builds multiple connections around the world:

Hello, hello, won’t you call me from San Francisco,
Tel Aviv, Hong Kong, Canton, Ohio,
from your corporate e-mail address,
from your turbid moods and peccadilloes?
Won’t you ring me from the netherside
of the universe, from the back entry
of Eido ...⁴⁴

The complex network of connections from San Francisco to Tel Aviv, Hong Kong, Canton, and Ohio accommodates to a translocal mode of living and thinking; and it evokes interactions among different cultural passages, challenging homogeneous and exclusivist concepts of belonging. The conversation of diverse locations produces a correlative form of identity that is both immediately local and yet mediated by the wide world. Henri Lefebvre’s theory of “differential space” may help us understand how the local and the global interrelate together in modern times. What Lefebvre asserts is a paradox: On the one hand, we need to envisage a mutually supplementary correlation between the “global (or conceived)

space” and the “fragmented (or directly experienced) space”; and on the other hand, we should not ignore the tension and its resultant complexity that exist within either of the spaces.⁴⁵ What has emerged from this situation is a new global-conscious identity that operates within the very structures of local place that it attempts to transcend.

The translocal identity is indicative of the coming of an “epoch of simultaneity.” As Michel Foucault points out, “we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.”⁴⁶ Relative to the multilayered simultaneity, the conventional understanding of place as a consistent spatial construction is subject to renegotiation, since the concepts of border and locality as products of both ideological and geographic strategies of containment have been disrupted by the flows of immigration. “Transnational migrant circuits,” as Roger Rouse observes, compress separate places into a single international community “through the continuous circulation of people, money, goods, and information.”⁴⁷ Immigrants can be seen as transnational agents who are affected both by “local hegemonic contentions and global contexts, while at the same time influencing them.”⁴⁸ Immigration, therefore, represents an acute feeling of identity destabilization in this transnational world; and it is exactly this destabilization that rescinds any essentialist assertions for the patrimonial authenticity or purity of nationhood. The experiences of immigration as well as the increasing transnational communication have changed the configuration of identity articulations. Although each culture originally derives from a certain place, it must move beyond its primordial territory to interact and to mingle with others to keep its vitality.

In a sense, immigration gives impetus to the process of denationalization which, in Sau-ling C. Wong’s words, “entails a relaxation of the distinction between what is Asian American and what is ‘Asian.’”⁴⁹ As mutual penetration has become an increasingly important characteristic of our age, we simply don’t know where we should draw the division between Asia and America, and between the global and the local. Immigration suggests a loosened cultural order and national structure, and opens doorways to multiple configurations and diverse articulations of identity that challenge the overdetermined, canonized national discourse. When talking about immigrant identity, we can no longer continue to think of nation as a geographical or an ethnographic locality, and we must reimagine nation as a mobile body of interrelationships, where the enunciatory interaction among the differential cultural presences trans-relate various mythical, historical, political, and psychological discourses into an accumulative entity, which contests singular national dominance by admitting foreignness of languages, alienated memories, and marginal experiences. The transnational commensurability established by cultural trans-relation suggests a new, transcending national identity. As Hamid Naficy observes, immigrants are “interstitial creatures, liminars suffused with hybrid excess”; therefore, their identities accommodate a paradox: “On the one hand, like Derrida’s ‘undecidables’ they can be ‘both and neither’”; “On the other hand, they could aptly be called, in Rushdie’s words, ‘at once plural and partial.’”⁵⁰ This paradox shows that the forces of different national elements may challenge the absolute, singular form of national belonging by relocating the site of identity articulation in correlation with global/local negotiations. Immigration thus changes the very nature of nation and offers new ways of fashioning identity among different and plural cultural locations.

Conclusion

“Nation,” to use Home Bhabha’s term, is “a metaphor”⁵¹; and this metaphor signifies numerous disjunctions and conjunctions of human populations and relations in history. What we have witnessed in the past few decades is the increasing transnational dimensions of a nation. Home, family, and commu-

nity which traditionally reside within a singular national space have become the “nodes of international” networks.⁵² Modern immigration, which calls for rethinking of the meanings of nation, should be understood in terms of continuities and discontinuities that mediate between the local and the global. Immigrants, in the process of crossing and re-crossing borders of space, time, culture, and history, have trans-related “various discourses of intimacy, home, and neighborhood, together with others of global distance” into a multinational society.⁵³ “The multinational society,” as Julia Kristeva argues, would be “conscious of its discontents and limits, knowing only indomitable people ready-to- help-themselves in their weakness, a weakness whose other name is our radical strangeness.”⁵⁴ The formation of immigrant identity is not a moment of transition, nor a time of combination, but a process of transnational interaction—an ambivalent process of splitting and overlapping that marks the identification with radical strangeness betwixt and between nations. Articulations of identity depend on the transnational linkages that are not built through the ready-made names, concepts, paradigms, or theories, but through rethinking, redescribing, and redefining our national, or rather post-national, liminalities. What immigrant discourse suggests, according to Frank Davey, “is the arrival of the post-national state—a state invisible to its own citizens, indistinguishable from its fellows, maintained by invisible political forces, and significant mainly through its position within the grid of world-class postcard cities.”⁵⁵ Immigration thus magnifies the transnational liminality of a nation and stimulates more flexible forms of subjectification. In Catherine Hall’s words, “what might be described as a ‘post-nation’” is “a society that has discarded the notion of a homogeneous nation state with singular forms of belonging.”⁵⁶ In such a post-national world, immigration evokes constant negotiations among differential global and local discourses and trans-relates diverse cultural, historical, political, and psychological presences into deterritorialized constructions which demand and activate decentered transnational communication and communities.

Notes

1. Mike Featherstone, “Localism, Globalism, and Cultural Identity,” in *Globe/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, eds. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 61.
2. Paul Gilroy, “Cultural Studies and Ethnic Absolutism,” in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 188.
3. Marilyn Chin, *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow: Poems* (New York: Norton, 2002), 45.
4. Marilyn Chin, *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 1994), 72.
5. Ken Weisner, “Interview with Marilyn Chin,” *MELUS* 37, No. 3 (Fall 2012): 217.
6. Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.
7. Ibid.
8. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 195.
9. Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Granta* 13 (1984): 170-2.
10. Ibid.
11. Marilyn Chin, *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty*, 16.
12. Marilyn Chin, *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow: Poems* (New York: Norton, 2002), 100.
13. Ibid., 15.
14. Iain Chambers, “Signs of Silence, Lines of Listening,” in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, eds. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 53.
15. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), iii.

16. Wolfgang Iser, "The Emergence of a Cross-Cultural Discourse: Thomas Carlyle's Sartor Resartus," in *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*, eds. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 264.
17. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 235.
18. Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 18.
19. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 42.
20. *Ibid.*, 133.
21. *Ibid.*, 3.
22. Marilyn Chin, *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty*, 19.
23. Wolfgang Iser, "The Emergence of a Cross-Cultural Discourse," 248.
24. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd. "Introduction: Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse: What is to be Done?" in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, eds. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 103.
25. Lawrence Grossberg, "The Space of Culture, the Power of Space," in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, eds. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 178.
26. *Ibid.*, 178.
27. Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," in *Identity: the Real Me*, eds. Homi K. Bhaba and Lisa Appignanesi (Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), 44.
28. Marilyn Chin, *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty*, i.
29. William N. West, "'No Endless Monument': Artificial Memory and Memorial Artifact in Early Modern England," in *Regimes of Memory*, eds. Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin (New York: Routledge, 2003), 62.
30. John R. Gillis, "Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship," in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.
31. Marilyn Chin, *Dwarf Bamboo* (Greenfield Center, NY: The Greenfield Review Press, 1987), 3.
32. Marilyn Chin, *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty*, 71.
33. Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," *Radical America* 23 (1989): 19.
34. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 18.
35. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, "Introduction: Tracking the Global/Local," in *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, eds. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.
36. Doreen Massey, "Power-geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, eds. Jon Bird, et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 69.
37. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994), 155.
38. Marilyn Chin, *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, 32.
39. Aihwa Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States," 122.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, 123.
43. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 154.
44. Marilyn Chin, *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, 58.
45. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Black-

- well Publishers, 1991), 355.
46. Michel Foucault, 1986. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22.
 47. Roger Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism," *Diaspora* 1, No. 1 (1991): 14.
 48. Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16.
 49. Sau-ling C. Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," *Amerasia Journal* 21 (1995), 5.
 50. Hamid Naficy, "Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Centre," in *Globe/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, eds. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 125.
 51. Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 293.
 52. Frank Davey, *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone Canadian Novel Since 1967* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 259.
 53. Ibid.
 54. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 195.
 55. Frank Davey, *Post-National Arguments*, 110.
 56. Catherine Hall, "Histories, Empires and the Post-colonial Moment," in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizon*, eds. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 67.

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