

Experimental Poetics of the Asian Diaspora: Readings in Meatspace and Cyberspace

By

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Introduction: Experimental Poetics of the Asian Diaspora

In 1995, Korean American poet and scholar Walter K. Lew published an anthology called *Premonitions*, a collection bringing together the works of Asian American and Asian Canadian experimental poets such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Tan Lin, Roy Miki, and Fred Wah for, according to Brian Kim Stefans, the first time in literary history. In that same year, Stefans also reviewed Lew's *Excerpts from Δikth/DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)*, a mixed media critical collage that both responds to and adopts the methods pioneered by Cha's seminal *Dictée*. Stefans' review remains one of the few existing attempts to close read Lew's text not only for its content but also for its theoretical interest in marrying multi-media practices with Asian American poetry. Stefans himself harbours similar interests, as the creator and maintainer of a website that has published and archived multi-media electronic poetry since 1998. And Fred Wah, an Asian Canadian writer first brought to American attention in *Premonitions*, was the co-creator of the world's first online literary magazine in 1984. For many years, these biographical facts have seemed only tangentially connected to each other, linked through free association rather than through any theorization of their relationship. With my dissertation, I want to do the work of critically thinking through these relations. I want to make the case that we can connect these and other related poets through a diasporic reading of experimental and new media poetry by writers of Asian descent, and indeed that we *should* connect them through this reading. The Asian diaspora is a framework that helps us interpret the techniques, forms, and content of digitally-influenced poetry, and in return the experimentations of these poets enrich how we conventionally conceive of the categories of Asian Anglophone and diasporic writing.

During the 1980s and 90s, there was increasing interest in conceptualizing diaspora in terms of global networks, rather than defining diaspora more traditionally by the word's

etymological roots in the Greek for dispersal from a central source. One prominent example of this shift is social theorist Arjun Appadurai's "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" (1990). In that essay, Appadurai proposes making sense of modern globalization as a network where transnational subjects can imagine collectivities through five different metaphorical landscapes. While the terminology of these "scapes" did not catch on in mainstream usage, the idea of a new era of multi-faceted global movement continued to resonate for cultural theorists. Whereas Appadurai bases his terms on the physical locomotion of peoples, I suggest that the core idea should be expanded to the digital realm. Published three years before the debut of the Mosaic web browser,¹ Appadurai's vision of Benedict Anderson's imaginary communities realized on a global scale applies even better to cyberspace. My dissertation explores experimental poetry of the Asian diaspora in the years immediately before, during, and after the historical moment when the concept of diaspora as global networks becomes realized through the Internet.

I am certainly not the first to suggest conceiving of cyberspace as a diasporic space, especially in relation to the modern Asian diaspora. In the Western imagination, Asian bodies have long been associated with the technologically advanced, from the machine-like industriousness of nineteenth-century Asian immigrant indentured workers in North America to the nerdy hacker sidekicks in contemporary Hollywood movies. Media theorist Wendy Chun submits that our very usage of the word "cyberspace" to refer to the Internet constitutes a kind of techno-orientalism.² "Cyberspace" as a term was coined by William Gibson in his influential

¹ Mosaic was the first popularly available private web browser that eventually became Netscape Navigator. It was

² In the 1995 essay "Techno-Orientalism: Japan Panic," David Morley and Kevin Robins coin the term "techno-orientalism" to mean the late 1980s and early 1990s American panic response to the rapid rate at which Japan seemed to be overtaking the United States in high-tech fields. Stephen Sohn writes that, "in traditional Orientalism, the East often is configured as backwards, anti-progressive, and primitive" whereas techno-Orientalism configures

cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*, to describe a virtual reality network. Chun reads the naming of our real world's cyberspace after Gibson's fictional one as a desire to live out a fantasy, since Gibson's cyberspace "is navigable and conceptualizable in a way the Internet, or 'real' cyberspace, is not" and has "little in common with the Net" (4-5). Chun argues that this desire for the realization of the fantasy is analogous to the invention of an idea of the Orient as theorized by Edward Said. "Rather than simply describing the Orient, orientalists have *projected* an Orient that does not easily map onto geographies and cultures deemed oriental," Chun explains, and "The status of the Orient as fictional yet indexical to an 'other' space parallels the status of cyberspace" (9). It is no coincidence that *Neuromancer* is also rife with other markers of techno-orientalism, most notably in its aesthetic descriptions of future Japan. Because of these historical associations, therefore, an Asian who takes up computer programming is much more compatible with these stereotypes than an Asian who takes up creating experimental poetry. Digital poetics is the subversive nexus between these fields. In most collections of English-language poetry, poets of Asian descent can be expected to make up only a very small proportion; yet in the much narrower category of English-language poetry influenced by cyberspace, Asian diasporic poets stand out as influential early adopters.

There are literary and political stakes in recognizing that the writers I engage with are articulating Asian diasporic identities through experimental poetics. Charles Bernstein, in his critical writings on contemporary poetry culture, observes that "Too often, the works selected to represent cultural diversity are those that accept the model of representation assumed by the dominant culture in the first place" (6). Cultural diversity should also include formal diversity,

the East as rather *too* futuristic—both types of Orientalism, then, project "inhuman qualities ... onto Asian bodies," and in techno-Orientalism Asians are imagined to have superb technological expertise but an "affectual absence" that "resonates as an undeveloped or, worse still, a retro grade humanism" (8).

and yet far too often it prizes works that uphold an essentialist view of identity through expected forms instead. "Difference," he writes, "is confined to subject matter and thematic material, a.k.a. local color, excluding the formal innovations that challenge those dominant paradigms of representations" (6). The works I analyze in this dissertation are formally innovative and challenge dominant representational paradigms, and in analyzing them I want to draw attention to not only the fact that they exist in defiance of the common problematic identified by Bernstein, but far more: not only do they exist against the grain, they are influential, they do work that expands artistic, theoretical, and technological boundaries in the field of Asian diasporic poetry and in literature at large.

Poetry, in a broad sense, has always been an important site for the assertion of community in the Asian diaspora. In Hong Kong, the expression of the local as a way to reject both the British and Chinese governmental claims over the citizens made late poet Ping-kwan Leung a legendary figure: the 2013 *New York Times* posthumous tribute to his life calls him "the poet and intellectual who celebrated and defined Hong Kong." By locating community in an abstract site of shared cultural experiences rather than in any shared physical land claim, the poetry of Hong Kong gives us one clear case study for how to implement diaspora as a literary reading strategy. Meanwhile, poetry has also been important to the rise of Asian American politics in the United States, particularly as an artistic expression that asserted the presence and the civil rights of citizens of Asian descent during the pan-ethnic Third World Movement that began at California university campuses and spread across the nation in 1968. Similarly, Asian Canadian poetry came to prominence with Fred Wah, during a period when Canadian writers were consciously cultivating a sense of nationhood separate from both Britain and America. Wah theorized an explicitly political role that "alienethnic" poetic language can play in resisting the

assimilationist forces of dominant culture (*Faking* 52). These overtly political aims and effects are, however, not all unified, and poets of Asian descent are not simply and monolithically “Asian”—they are also of their time, are influenced by artists before them, have allegiances to and write back against various aesthetic trends. Throughout my chapters, Modernism, Black Mountain, Language, and other such schools of avant-garde poetry are referred to in the context of their influence on Asian diasporic writers. While contemporary Asian diasporic poetics continue to have the political interests of previous decades, it is also of its time and in conversation with more recent and less discretely defined areas of digital poetics.

In a statement he made at the University of Maine in 2002, Brian Kim Stefans suggested that digital poetics works better for “the poetry of situations,” “which is to say poems that might not be poems at all but call attention to the social forces,” than for the lyric or the sentimental, because those types of poetry do not “need anything that digital technology has to offer” (*Before* 246). The situated experiences and political concerns of those in the Asian diaspora are in fact the subjects of social forces, and the aesthetic, technological, and conceptual capabilities offered by cyberspace allow for unique artistic reactions and resistances to these forces. Conversely, looking to the Asian diaspora as a reading mode for understanding digital poetics provides a framework by which to make sense of a new set of poetics largely still seen as too disparate or nascent or even trendy to be taken seriously outside of avant-garde subsets of academic literary departments. By locating the interconnection of ethnic studies, diaspora studies, and experimental literature in Asian digital poetics, I am suggesting that what digital technology offers Asian diasporic poetry is just as important as what the Asian diasporic reading framework offers for understanding digital technology. Ultimately, my project is engaged in both developing diaspora as a reading framework for contemporary experimental Asian poetic/cross-genre works,

and showing that reading diasporically is a key way to understand the formal experimentations made possible by digital technology.

Methodology

Although, as I have mentioned, there will be some acknowledgement of the genealogy of poetic influence in my chapters, tracing the historical or personal influences of individual poets will not be the primary method of my dissertation. Instead, I am more interested in what might be called a genealogy of form—that is to say, I am interested in closely reading the experimental techniques and formal content of poetic and cross-genre works as they developed alongside advancements in Internet technology (such as but not limited to textual instability, mixed media, problematized reading processes, and blurring lines between creator, consumer, and critic through interactivity, collaboration, randomization, and mechanization), and analyzing how they relate to key themes across Asian diasporic poetry.

Previous writing on the subject of electronic literature has frequently struck me as highly explanatory, often involving showing examples of digital works simply to introduce the reader to them. This tendency is of course necessary for any new field that has not yet established its foundational definitions to a broader readership, and in fact some of these very texts will be consulted in this dissertation because they are so useful. However, my project aims to contribute to a growing turn in digital poetics scholarship toward developing and deepening the critical theory of the field. Rather than just further exposition, my dissertation engages in close analysis of the texts I read, and proposes theoretical approaches for making sense of them in relation to their contexts and to each other.

The foundations of all of my chapters include close reading and literary analysis of texts, as befits my background in literary studies. However, I enlarge the bounds of what we might

traditionally consider as part of the text, thereby also expanding what can be subjected to close reading. I argue that the objects of my study, which share an interest in calling into question multiple boundaries including those of nation, language, genre, medium, authorship, text and reader, make this method a necessity. Close reading calls for sustained analytic attention to form and content, and by paying the same sort of attention to the interactive, collaborative, and technological mechanisms of a work as well, I incorporate these elements into my textual analysis. Each particular chapter will also draw on its own relevant theoretical background, as well as build upon what was established in previous chapters. Rather than front-loading all of the theory I will use into this introduction, I will instead introduce it as it becomes relevant in the following chapters.

Definition of Terms

The main literary objects of my study are what I have so far been calling “digital poetry” or “new media poetry,” a subset of electronic literature. According to the Electronic Literature Organization, we should include all “work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the standalone or networked computer” under the umbrella of electronic literature (3), but N. Katherine Hayles points out that this leaves much room for interpretation of what should be considered “literary aspects” (4). She suggests that the literary does not necessarily have to mean only the verbal, and can also include creative works that interrogate the histories, contexts, and production of literature, in addition to literature proper. She also encourages scholars to focus not only on either the machine or the embodied reader/writer, but also on the intermediation between both body and machine (x).

Poet and critic Loss Pequeño Glazier, who founded the Electronic Poetry Center, argues in *Digital Poetics: Hypertext, Visual-Kinetic Text, and Writing in Programmable Media* that

electronic literature should be understood as a continuation of experimental print literature, especially in regards to poetic practice, because digital media lend themselves so well to forms that disrupt traditional subject-centred poetry. The focus of my dissertation is informed by both Hayles' and Glazier's suggested definitions, and I include in my analysis not only digital poetry from the Asian diaspora but also a through-line that connects the digital to experimental Asian diasporic works of earlier periods. I am interested in this link between experimental print and electronic poetry, and in exploring how new media qualities exist not only in the technology by which poetry is conveyed to readers but also in the content of the poetry itself. Although Hayles generally limits her definition of electronic literature to works that are both created and meant to be read on a computer, I use a broader interpretation that includes print poetry informed by digital practices such as data mining and automated scripts (for example, Tan Lin's *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking.*) as well as installations that expand beyond the computer screen (for example, the 'Add Oil' Machine by media art collective Stand By You during Hong Kong's Occupy Central protests).

Despite the fact that the Internet is a global infrastructure of hardware and software while the World Wide Web is just one of the services it powers, in deference to common usage the technical differences between the terms "cyberspace," "the Internet," and "the web" will be inconsequential in this dissertation unless otherwise stated. Since the introduction of the Mosaic browser in 1993, the web in its most basic form has been a collection of pages joined by hyperlinks connected in a potentially infinite matrix, and its identity as a new medium has been "defined fundamentally by its connection to other locations and sites" (Marshall 47-8). More specifically, later chapters of this dissertation will be interested in the kinds of formal and political expressions enabled by a particular vision of the web, conceptualized in 2004 by media

mogul Tim O'Reilly as "Web 2.0"—the web as a cooperative social space where the line between producers and consumers blurs.³ Collaborative websites such as Wikipedia, YouTube, and Tumblr illustrate how relying on user-generated content has become a regular Internet practice. The "2.0" does not denote one particular upgrade but rather encompasses the cumulative changes that have made the Internet a site of virtual communities. Online content generation, originally regarded as a geeky subcultural practice, has become quotidian with the advent of Web 2.0.

This universalization and normalization of cyber content production means that "cyberculture has become more than passive, more than interactive, even: it has become a key (potential) site of cultural production for its multitude of users" (Bell 5). Media science scholar Ethan Zuckerman differentiates Web 2.0 from the Internet as it was first conceived thusly: whereas "the Web was invented so physicists could share research papers," "Web 2.0 was invented so we could share cute pictures of our cats. The tools of Web 2.0, while designed for mundane and uses, can be extremely powerful in the hands of digital activists, especially those in environments where free speech is limited." Such an understanding of Web 2.0 allows us to approach digital poetics as Stefans does: to not think of the web as just another medium of "archiving" literature, but potentially "as some form of activism ... rather than simply to 'make something more available'" (*Before* 262).

Additionally, my dissertation comes from the point of view that race and diaspora are not

³ According to O'Reilly's media company, there are conflicting stories about how 'Web 2.0' was coined—Darcy DiNucci uses the term as early as 1999 in an article called "Fragmented Future," but her definition does not capture the same nuances as current usages. From 1999 to 2002, there were infrequent attempts to further define 'Web 2.0' by bloggers such as John Robb. O'Reilly claims that the phrase first arose in a 2003 "brainstorming session between O'Reilly and MediaLive International," a producer of technology tradeshows and conferences. Regardless of who invented the term, its meaning as generally understood today was popularised by the first Web 2.0 conference co-hosted by O'Reilly's company and MediaLive in October 2004.

natural categories, but rather take on social definitions just as man-made technologies do. Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" rejects a definition of "cultural identity" as "one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self,' [...] which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (393), arguing instead that cultural identity "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.'" (394). By recognizing that "cultural identities come from somewhere, [and] have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation" (394), I stress that the observations I make about diasporic community are not definitive but contingent upon this specific moment of time and my own position as an observer. In addition, I use Omi & Winant's theory of race as a "social fact," neither a purely ideological construct nor an objective biological condition, but still having fundamental influence on the realities of social interaction. Omi & Winant's "racial formation approach" is based on a "process-oriented theory of race" that sees "the meaning and salience of race [as] forever being reconstituted in the present" (204). These racial theories were established before the onset of cyber performativity, which makes the current age of Web 2.0 a fitting time to revisit how race and culture are conceptually constructed. The intervention of cyberspace, with its novel possibilities for identity creation and community formation, should spur us to ask new questions about the existing cultural theory frameworks. When I use the word "Asian" in this project, I am always conscious of how it is not a stable category, and it is my hope that the reader will not find this instability to be a shortcoming but instead evocative of the very irreducibilities that drive Asian diasporic poets to create experimental works.

My use of "Asian diaspora" mainly covers Asian migration in the areas of Hong Kong and North America, while also touching on other areas of Asia and Britain, but certainly not encompassing the global span of the Asian diasporic community. This limitation is mostly

dictated by my choice of texts and authors. Due to historic circumstance, the early development of electronic poetry centered in North America, and consequently many of the poets with whom my work will engage are at least partially based in the US or Canada. My use of the term "diaspora" will be worked out in much greater detail in my chapter on Hong Kong poetry as a case study for the diasporic reading lens. Based on Daniel & Jonathan Boyarin's work on modern diaspora as well as the aforementioned Appadurai, I use the word "diaspora" not to mean permanent political exile but rather global networks of immigrant communities that establish bonds through the common experiences of relocation.

Aihwa Ong writes in *Flexible Citizenship* that the movement of indentured Asian labourers during the height of nineteenth century colonialism would be more in line with the traditional subjects of diaspora studies, like the historical forced Jewish and Black migrations. However, although Asian refugees continue to exist, a lot of today's emigration out of Asia toward North America is primarily economically driven and voluntary, rather than politically coerced. In "Cyberpublics and Diaspora Politics Among Transnational Chinese," Ong writes that although "diaspora as permanent political exile is often conflated with contemporary forms of fairly unrestricted mobility," the term diaspora is "increasingly invoked by affluent migrants in transnational contexts to articulate an inclusive global ethnicity for disparate populations the world over who may be able to claim a common racial or cultural ancestry" (305). She argues that "transnationality" is a better word to describe these "new kinds of disembedded diaspora identifications enabled by technologies" (305); despite granting that "diaspora sentiments may linger," she argues that it may be analytically inexact to continue calling this new kind of diaspora a "diaspora" (309).

With apologies to Ong, I persist in using the word "diaspora" in this project because of

how it asks us to conceptualize the creation of communities as separate from the sharing of physical territory. Transnationality, with its implications of both global trade and nation-state borders, does not contain the connotations of diaspora that I argue make it so salient as a mode of reading Asian digital poetics. While I respect and see the importance of Ong's critiques of its limitations, I hope in my Hong Kong chapter to convincingly show how an expansion of Boyarin & Boyarin's definition of diaspora will be indispensable to putting my chosen cyber-poetic works in conversation with each other.

Outline of Chapters

My chapters are organized by common thematic concerns as well as chronological order. I use my first chapter as a case study on Hong Kong poetry to establish my framework for diasporic reading, but from the end of that chapter onwards the dissertation progresses mostly linearly forward in time. My archive reaches furthest back in time in chapter two, my chapter on aesthetic experimentation, as it uses the history of a burgeoning Asian American avant-garde in the 1980s to set up its argument. The chapter after that moves on to the moment at which Internet use began to become more and more widespread, in the 90s and early 2000s. Finally, the fourth chapter stretches into the most recent and currently still evolving forms of Asian diasporic poetry in cyberspace. These are not clean breaks in eras, as the time periods overlap, but there is a general sequential movement in this dissertation. There is also a sense of the chapters building upon each other: for example, the chapter on formal experimentation comes first, because the last chapter on online political communities in the present day shows how politics are enacted *through* experimental aesthetics. In the broadest sense, the three main branches of my dissertation are to establish Asian diaspora as a lens for reading contemporary poetry, to make a case for the ways in which Asian diasporic poetics and digital poetics are inextricably tied

together and help us understand each other, and to contribute to the development of new reading techniques for the close analysis of texts that include their forms, contexts, and technological infrastructure as integral parts of the reading experience.

Chapter one is called "Mapping the Imaginary: Hong Kong Poetry, Diasporic Reading, and the Siting of Non-Physical Spaces." In this chapter, I use the poetry of Hong Kong as a case study to demonstrate how to apply diaspora as a method for reading Anglophone poetry by writers of Asian descent. Hong Kong itself, as a former British colony and current Special Administrative Region of China, is rich with theoretical possibilities that realign our ideas of the relationships between community identification, political agency, and shared territory. The idea of a "Hong Kong identity" that I explore as a site in this chapter is distinct from those identities imposed by or revolving around Mainland China and British colonizers. This feeling of cultural distinctiveness is empirically shown by research data from the University of Hong Kong's Public Opinion Programme, which found in 2011 that "the proportion of people identifying themselves as 'Hong Kong citizens' outnumbers that of 'Chinese citizens' both in their narrow and broad senses," and that "people's identification with 'Hong Kong citizens' has reached a ten-year high, while that of 'Chinese citizens' has dropped to a 12-year low." It is significant to note that Hong Kongers are not merely dis-identifying with being Chinese citizens—they are actively identifying as Hong Kong citizens. To the same extent, they also do not identify as British subjects, as being born in British Hong Kong before 1997 did not automatically equate to British citizenship despite being ruled by the British government.

Moreover, Hong Kongers had no political say in the negotiation process between China and Britain regarding the future of their home during the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. This declaration, signed in 1984, established the conditions under which the

People's Republic of China would resume sovereignty over the Hong Kong territories after British rule from 1898 to 1997. As a result, anxiety about what would happen come 1997 motivated almost all diasporic activities in Hong Kong in the decades around 1997 (Lin 70). Thus, the distinctiveness of contemporary Hong Kong identity is built not around either of the Joint Declaration's signatories, but around being left out of the process. Hong Kongers are united by their senses of instability, contingency, impermanence, but also a strong sense of community in these shared feelings. This chapter will be guided by my understanding and expansion of Boyarin & Boyarin's theorization of the Jewish diaspora, as well as a variety of secondary sources on the Hong Kong diaspora, including the influential work of Ackbar Abbas. My main literary objects of analysis will be Dung Kai-cheung's *Atlas*, Leung Ping-kwan's *City at the End of Time*, and jam ismail's *from the Diction Air*.

It may not be readily apparent why these texts should be read diasporically, when two of the three are written by those born in Hong Kong and continuing to live in Hong Kong. However, I argue in chapter one that diaspora is entwined as a way of life in Hong Kong, and make a case for using diaspora as a concept that allows us to decouple the idea of community from the idea of a shared land. My focal texts can be understood as sharing diasporic concerns born of shared circumstance, in some ways unique to the situation of Hong Kong but in other ways transportable to the Asian diaspora at large. By reading works such as *Atlas*, *City at the End of Time*, and *from the Diction Air* together through the framework of diaspora theory, we can see thematic linkages emerge that develop the features of a diasporic reading framework. At the heart of my definition of diasporic reading is the concept of separating shared community from shared land. For example, a primary concern shared by these texts is the problem of how to create something of your own from the subject position you are given, without land or political

power, between cultures and languages. These Hong Kong poets try to work out how to affirm or maintain group identities without a traditional nation-state by exploring things such as alternative geographies, minor literatures and languages, hybridity and decentralization, and the site of the imaginary. They suggest alternative definitions of place that do not rely on the literal, physical, or political, but instead on the imagined, remembered, and conceptual. By putting these works together, I also read against more common and dominant postcolonial and nationalist readings by suggesting a diasporic framework that focuses on the networks between minority subjects rather than on oppositional relationships between minorities and the majority.

My establishment of a diasporic reading framework in chapter one brings me up against not only more commonly used frameworks for reading Hong Kong literature such as postcolonialism and nationalism, but also against certain limitations such as the ones described by critic Sau-ling Cynthia Wong. Towards the end of chapter one, I will address Wong's concerns about how diaspora theory is vulnerable to depoliticization and what she calls denationalization. I suggest that even despite these valid apprehensions, the diasporic framework is still important for communities such as the Hong Kong diaspora and portable to the global Asian diaspora, as communities that cannot ensure their own survival by making claims to conventional nationalism rooted in land control and state recognition. Because so few literary critics have ever written on Hong Kong poetry in any sustained length and depth, this chapter will not only help illustrate my theoretical framework but also fill a significant gap in the scholarship of Asian diasporic literature.

Chapter two, entitled "The Shape of Things: Aesthetic Experimentation in the Asian Diaspora," posits that the diasporic framework allows us to make deeper sense of formal and generic experimentation in Asian diasporic poetry. In this chapter, I focus on analyzing jam

ismail and Jamelie Hassan's collaborative *Jamelie-Jamila Project* (1991), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982), and Walter K. Lew's *Excerpts from ΔIKTH/DIKTE for DICTEE* (1982) (1991). I show that reading these formally experimental works in the context of the larger Asian diaspora allows us to gain insights that are different from those gained through other, more conventional interpretive lenses such as feminist, nationalist, and de-racialized readings. The focal texts in chapter two are connected by a shared interest in experimental form and a shared time period of the 80s and early 90s, shortly before the Internet boom ushered in by Mosaic. When I say experimental form, I mostly allude to how it is characterized by Fred Wah in his critical work, which I will go into much more detail about in chapter two. One of the central tenets of his theoretical argument is that the best approach for expressing the marginalized identity of a minority writer in diaspora is through traditionally marginalized forms, grammars, and styles. The works I choose to engage with in chapter two are notable for insisting upon the expression of Asian diasporic identity *through* experimental forms in some way, in order to achieve their poetic interrogations of space, place, memory, nation, language, selfhood, and more.

My analyses of these works build upon the definition of diasporic reading that I established in chapter one's case study of Hong Kong, and also add new dimensions to this reading framework. More specifically, I use diasporic reading to show how the abstract conceptualization of shared non-physical spaces and the multiplicity of minority literatures are crucial to understanding what ismail and Hassan's *Jamelie-Jamila Project* does. I also further the value of diasporic reading by expanding on its function in moving us beyond common binaries, through an analysis of various existing critical interpretations of Cha's *Dictée*. Experimental Asian diasporic works are often plotted along binary spectrums that pit form against content,

experimental against ethnic aesthetics, narrative against language, etc. I argue that *Dictée* and the other works in this chapter are more productively read when we see that, much like in a diaspora, we do not have to take up one stable position with simple linear relationships to other positions. To read diasporically is to see how categories work together in a network rather than in opposition. Chapter two also contains a sustained analysis of Lew's *Excerpts* in relation to *Dictée* and demonstrates how it can be read as an argument for a pan-ethnic Asian identity in a global Asian diaspora. In the conclusion to this chapter, I also touch upon the breakdown of distinctions between subject and object in highly interactive works such as the ones investigated in this chapter. This breakdown becomes an increasing interest in this dissertation as it moves towards Asian diasporic literature in the age of cyberspace.

In chapter three, "Early Adopters: Asian Diasporic Experimentations with the Early Internet," I investigate poets of the Asian diaspora who pioneered digitally influenced works in the early days of personal computing. The works I analyze in this chapter include Fred Wah's contributions as a writer, co-founding editor, and programmer for *SwiftCurrent*, founded in 1984 as "the world's first on-line literary magazine" (Keep et al.). I argue that this magazine is an important representation of desires for the decentralization of literary authority that could be enabled by computer networks. It also shows the flaws and gaps that keep digital technology from being a utopian solution to enduring problems in poetics. Other works that will be studied in chapter three include the new media poetry of Brian Kim Stefans, in particular his Flash-animated "The Dreamlife of Letters" and the collaborative project *Circulars*, both hosted on his website *arras.net*, which he began in 1998. In addition, this chapter will look at the works of Tan Lin, an Asian American poet who is, in Stefans' opinion, one of the first people to harness the torrent of "found language" online (*Before 7*). I closely engage with Lin's interest in creating a

seemingly neutral "ambient poetics," in particular through a thorough analysis of his mixed-media collage work of found poetry, semi-autobiography, and visual material called *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking*. In doing so, chapter three contends with whether writing about oppression or racialization are requirements for inclusion into Asian diasporic literature, whether Lin's works can be read as political, and why one would want to read politics into his work. Where chapter two argued for diasporic reading as a technique that allows us to get away from absolute binaries, chapter three more deeply delves into a deconstruction of the specific binary of political vs. apolitical.

As a whole, this chapter pushes against a dominant tendency to split the reputations of these early adopters, as though their digital experimentations and their racial concerns should be or even can be treated separately. Even Stefans' own compendium of his interviews and reviews, *Before Starting Over*, separates "Asian American Poetry" and "Digital Poetics" into different book sections. I argue against this bifurcation by showing that for Wah, Stefans, and Lin, the racial and political significance of being part of the Asian diaspora is quintessential to their experimental projects. Rather than treating their pioneering digital works as being unconnected to their other, 'ethnic' work, I demonstrate why we should see the experimental and the ethnic as linked projects. The early digital experimentations in this chapter share underlying interests in collaborative networks, subverting language rules, challenging the authority of who gets to dictate the distribution of reading materials, and fragmentations of the self—all goals that are also deeply connected to the writers' racialized subjectivities. Therefore, we should read these works of digital literature as Asian diasporic literature as well, and examine what doing so illuminates about the common concerns and differing interests of early adopters as evidenced by their works. This chapter also asks why writers of Asian diasporic descent would turn to new

media technologies, and in return what an Asian diasporic reading framework can bring to understanding electronic experimental works.

Chapter four, the final chapter of my dissertation, is titled "Collaborative Poem-Works: Political Community and Virtual Networks in the 21st Century" and centres around the theme of how recent and current works by writers in the Asian diaspora use social media technologies to create community. I coin the term 'collaborative poem-works' to encompass the main works I focus on in this chapter: Brian Kim Stefans' *Circulars*, Sachiko Murakami's interactive online *Project Rebuild*, and a collaborative project called *The Collected Poems of YFC* hosted on the Tumblr platform. Collaborative poem-works, in the context of my chapter, are artistic works in which one main person or group sets up the overarching premise and makes primary artistic decisions about the concept and format of the piece, but other contributors are invited to create and add to the work within parameters laid out by the primary creator. By calling them poem-works, rather than simply collaborative works, I am emphasizing the importance of poetic analysis to my methodology in this chapter on works that can also reasonably be called websites or public projects or collaborative blogs. In my readings of these collaborative poem-works, I focus not only on content and form but also aspects such as collaborative interactions and the multi-media features of these works—aspects that may not be generally thought of as analyzable through a poetic reading.

Questions taken up in the previous three chapters return with new nuances in chapter four. The crux of my theoretical work throughout this dissertation asks the reader to imagine diaspora as community based not upon shared physical spaces but rather upon shared experiences. Chapter four revisits this theme and asks if we can now imagine it as a community of shared actions, despite these actions not taking place in the same physical spaces, through the

simultaneous action and virtual presence made possible by digital technology. To this end, I analyze what cultural critics have termed hashtag activism movements, most importantly the Umbrella Movement in 2014 Hong Kong and the multi-media artworks that came out of that movement. I also compare it to the political community expressed through The Collected Poems of YFC, a collaborative poetic project hosted on Tumblr in response to Michael Derrick Hudson's use of the Chinese pseudonym Yi-Fen Chou and the resulting claims of "racial nepotism" in the literary industry.

Another theme to be revisited in chapter four is formal experimentation. Throughout the other chapters, we have seen how experimentations and audience interaction change alongside available technology. This chapter asks what new ways of playing with form and hierarchy are enabled by the contemporary, social media-focused Internet. Key texts that I use to explore the different artistic and political applications of interactive technologies include the aforementioned Collected Poems of YFC Tumblr and Sachiko Murakami's Project Rebuild, a website where poems originally inspired by Vancouver's real estate market can be rewritten and remixed ("renovated," in the language of the site) by any user, whose new poem is then added to the neighbourhood for others to renovate.

Finally, this chapter revisits my understanding of the personal and the poetic as political, as influenced by Fred Wah's claim that "the ethnopoetics tool box" is "shared by writers who are marginalized, invisible, experimental, political, and in need of any tool that might imagine a culture that could recognize an alien identity and construct a common language of the other" (*Faking It* 66). Through an in-depth analysis of Stefans' Circulars and The Collected Poems of YFC, supplemented with examples from other collaborative online political and poetic projects, I explore what new tools for writers of the Asian diaspora have been added to this toolbox with the

advent of Internet technology. I also revisit the limitations of these tools, which leads me into a conclusion about the possible political stakes of this project.

Chapter One. Mapping the Imaginary: Hong Kong Poetry, Diasporic Reading, and the Siting of Non-Physical Spaces

On the eve of the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from the rule of Britain to the rule of the People's Republic of China (PRC),⁴ critically acclaimed Hong Kong novelist Dung Kai-cheung published an enigmatic book called *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*. Various describable as a collection of prose poetry, short stories, or semi-fictional essays, Dung himself calls it "a verbal collection of maps" (xii). Whatever one might label it, *Atlas* is clearly a meditation on Hong Kong's existence—geographically, politically, and conceptually. The anxiety over how Hong Kong can exist, and indeed *whether* Hong Kong exists, is a dominant theme in works of Hong Kong art created after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, which officially put an "end date" on the Hong Kong its inhabitants had known for generations. *Atlas* is no exception, but its unusual form forces the reader to come to an unusual understanding of its content. As opposed to the pre-existing and predominant modes of reading the films and literature of Hong Kong, which tend to favour nationalistic or postcolonial frameworks, mixed genre poetic works such as *Atlas* and others are most interesting and productive when understood through diaspora theory.

It may not be readily apparent why works from this geopolitical era should be read diasporically, when some of the main texts I choose to analyze in this chapter are written by those born in Hong Kong and continuing to live in Hong Kong. However, I argue that they can be understood as sharing a diasporic community born of shared circumstance, in some ways very unique to the situation of Hong Kong but in other ways transportable to the Asian diaspora at large. At the heart of my definition of diasporic reading is the concept of separating shared

⁴ For the purposes of clarity in this paper, the country of China shall be referred to as "Mainland China" or "the PRC," while "Chinese" is will be considered an ethnicity regardless of the state. "Hong Konger" or "people of Hong Kong" will refer to inhabitants of Hong Kong regardless of their ethnicity, Chinese or otherwise.

community from shared land. By reading works such as Dung's *Atlas*, Leung Ping-kwan's *City at the End of Time*, and jam ismail's "from the *Diction Air*" together through the framework of diaspora theory, we can see thematic linkages emerge that further develop the features of diasporic reading that make it valuable as a reading framework. A primary concern of the poetic works analyzed in this chapter is the question of how to create something of your own from the subject position you are given, without land or political power, between cultures and languages. The poets take on the challenge of working out how to affirm or maintain group identities without a traditional nation-state by exploring things such as alternative geographies, minor literatures and languages, hybridity and decentralization, and the site of the imaginary. They suggest ways that place can be defined not as a literal, physical, or political delineation, but as imagined, remembered, and conceptual instead. By making these works interact with each other, I also emphasize that unlike postcolonial or nationalist readings, the diasporic framework focuses on the networks between minority subjects rather than on oppositional relationships between minorities and the majority.

Hong Kong Identity, Diasporic Identity

To have a clear sense of what writers such as Dung, Leung, and ismail are doing in their works, we must first recognize the historical and political context of Hong Kong identity. The "Hong Kong identity" I speak of is understood as distinct from both Mainland China and British colonizers; instead, it is centred around the political trauma of the 1997 handover. Social scientists pinpoint the closing of the border between the PRC and Hong Kong during the respective periods of Maoist isolation and capitalist ascension as the moment when "sharply divergent patterns of development on the two sides of the border" began to emerge (Smart and Smart 182). Although the border re-opened after 1978, the different patterns were by then

established and the Sino-British Declaration only heightened the "sense of difference between themselves and mainlanders for many Hong Kong residents, and the transition strengthened Hong Kong identity, particularly after the Tiananmen and July 1 protests" (183), as Hong Kongers saw their own approaches to government and democratic rights as fundamentally incompatible with the PRC's. This feeling of cultural distinctiveness is empirically confirmed by research data from the University of Hong Kong's 2011 Public Opinion Programme:

If we use a dichotomy of 'Hong Kong citizens' versus 'Chinese citizens' to measure Hong Kong people's ethnic identity, the proportion of people identifying themselves as 'Hong Kong citizens' outnumbered that of 'Chinese citizens' both in their narrow and broad senses, by about 20 to 30 percentage points, while the percentage of those identifying themselves as 'Chinese citizens' has dropped to a new low since 2000, now at 17%. Also in terms of absolute rating, people's identification with 'Hong Kong citizens' has reached a ten-year high, while that of 'Chinese citizens' has dropped to a 12-year low.

(n.pag.)

It is significant to note that Hong Kongers are not merely disidentifying with being Chinese citizens—they are actively identifying as Hong Kong citizens. To the same extent, they also do not identify as British subjects, and being born in British Hong Kong before 1997 did not automatically equate to British citizenship despite being ruled by the British government. Film critic Sheldon Lu phrases it as living "a life without a proper nationality, being neither Chinese nor British," leading "the question of national and cultural affiliation" to become "the most problematic and of the foremost importance in the minds of Hong Kong residents" (275). A pioneer of Hong Kong cultural studies, scholar Ackbar Abbas explains that cultural identity is

paradoxically central to Hong Kongers' concerns but is also a relatively new idea. In "The Last Emporium: Verse and Cultural Space," he states that "In the past, all stories about Hong Kong tended to turn into stories about somewhere else—China, Taiwan, the West; as if there were not enough local substance to merit attention" (43). People only began to talk more about Hong Kong "as a unique cultural entity" as 1997 approached, especially after the Tiananmen Square massacre, "in line with Walter Benjamin's dictum that only that which is about to disappear becomes an image" (44). This sense of imminent disappearance is further complicated by conventional understandings of postcolonialism, for as Rey Chow observes, thinking of the PRC as a colonizing power "violates the telos of the conventional thinking about coloniality, in which coloniality is followed by emancipation. Hong Kong's return to China forces us to ask: what happens when colonialism is not a past but a future?" ("Things" n.pag.).

Moreover, Hong Kongers had no political say in the negotiation process between China and Britain regarding the future of their own territory during the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. As a result, the fear of what would happen with the turnover motivated almost all diasporic activities in the decades around 1997 (Lin 70). Thus, the distinctiveness of contemporary Hong Kong identity, which originated from alienation from both Mainland China and Britain, is now built not around either of the Joint Declaration's signatories, but around what the Declaration *signifies*. Hong Kongers are united by their senses of anxiety, instability, contingency, impermanence, but also a strong sense of community as people going through it together. This feeling of solidarity in the Hong Kong identity continues long after 1997 into the present day, as evidenced by the 2014 Umbrella Revolution protests and subsequent political activity, which I will cover in more depth in chapter four.

Despite the fact that many of the poets and critics I bring up in this chapter are Hong

Kong-based, I argue that it makes sense to read the literature produced in the context of these cultural concerns through a diasporic framework. It may seem counter-intuitive, since "diaspora" is usually defined as a population of people who have spread to other locations from a common place of origin, and some of the work read in this chapter does not seem to involve any migratory movement. However, there are two main reasons for applying diaspora as a concept to Hong Kong: first is that diaspora is entwined as a way of life in Hong Kong, and second and more importantly is that my usage of diaspora focuses on how it allows us to decouple the idea of community from the idea of a shared land.

Firstly, diaspora in the sense of movement has permeated Hong Kong from the start. Once comprised of sparsely populated islands, Hong Kong's inhabitants during the time of Imperial China came from largely oppressed minority ethnic sub-groups in the south of China, and its population grew when colonizers from Britain obtained it under a 99-year lease in 1898. Urban geographer George C.S. Lin goes as far as to claim that the Hong Kong people retained this openness to mobility and willingness to relocate through their diasporic ancestors, calling it the "great spatial mobility" and "refugee mentality" of Hong Kongers (63). Hong Kong is also known as the origin point of many diasporic journeys throughout Asia and the rest of the world. Due to the political anxieties caused by the Sino-British Joint Declaration, emigration figures increased throughout the decade of the 1990s so that "Hong Kong has averaged an annual loss of approximately 1 percent of its population" (Wong 136). Hong Kong residents have a remarkably high chance of either having experienced diaspora personally or through family, or knowing members of the Hong Kong diaspora.

Secondly, not only is Hong Kong steeped in the physical practices of diaspora, the tendency to think of Hong Kong as an "imaginary city" (alluded to in the subtitle of Dung Kai-

cheung's *Atlas*) opens itself up to a diasporic reading. Ackbar Abbas coined the term *déjà disparu* to describe the feeling that Hong Kongers have of their city having already disappeared, because it was based so tenuously in the first place on a temporary contract. Dung literalizes this idea by setting *Atlas* in a time when Hong Kong has completely collapsed, or disappeared, but through his archaeological project he is also putting a new twist on the idea: Hong Kong can be politically, governmentally, even physically disappeared, and yet can still exist in the imagination. Dung writes in the preface to *Atlas* that he rejects the common label of Hong Kong as "a borrowed place in a borrowed time"—a reference to the view that Hong Kong was taken from the PRC by the British but ultimately fated to be returned—because he vehemently believes that Hong Kong people "belong to the space-time that is ours. Nobody lends it to us and we don't borrow it from anybody" (xiii). He takes a statement about Hong Kong as a place and shifts its focus to how Hong Kong *people* perceive their space-time and their belonging to a community.

In their analysis of the Jewish diaspora, theorists Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin also make a shift away from physical spaces to shared cultural perceptions. They articulate a conceptualization of diaspora that focuses on decoupling the ideas of geographical belonging and cultural belonging. Group identity has traditionally been constructed as either "the product of a common genealogical origin" or "a common geographical origin" (86), and the challenge for diaspora studies is to imagine group identities beyond those definitions. The Boyarins suggest a product of shared practices and affective connections instead, which they concede seems to be in opposition to traditional Jewish claims of literal descendance from Abraham and thus physical kinship as the most important establishment of identity. Instead, they want to privilege diaspora, "a dissociation of ethnicities and political hegemonies," as a social structure that "begins to make possible a maintenance of cultural identity in a world grown thoroughly and inextricably

interdependent" (110). These claims also apply in the case of understanding Hong Kong's diasporic identity and the larger Asian diaspora. The rejection of literal geography, as well as the formation of community without and beyond political power, will feature strongly in my analysis of Dung's and Leung's poetry in this chapter and will also resurface in later chapters. The question of how to lay claim to other people's past as part of a *shared* past without being biologically essentialist about the "innate endowments" of race is also key to understanding the Asian diaspora as non-monolithic and multi-ethnic. Boyarin and Boyarin come to a middle ground in this question by focusing on shared feelings rather than biological claims: personal memories that can be extrapolated as shared experiences, bodies marked as being different from white or other races, shared social status with those your group compared to the dominant culture, and memories passed through childhood acculturation (94).

I am obviously not claiming that Jewish people and Hong Kong people are the same or interchangeable, but Boyarin and Boyarin promote a theory that is meant to be portable beyond the context of the Jewish diaspora. They see this approach to thinking about nationhood as a lesson or a gift that everyone can take from the Jewish diaspora: "Assimilating the lesson of Diaspora, namely that peoples and lands are not naturally and organically connected," "may be the most important contribution that Judaism has to make to the world" (110). An important idea to glean from what they call "diasporized identity" is that "it is possible for a people to maintain its distinctive culture, its difference, without controlling land" (110). In a similar vein, Arjun Appadurai points out our tendency to allow "the nation and the state [to] become one another's projects," where groups who share feelings of nationhood seek to co-opt land and state power, while states try to monopolize those feelings to consolidate power (37). Diaspora subverts the hyphen that usually links "nation-state". Read together, these two formulations of diaspora help

to articulate what I mean when I say that works such as Dung's *Atlas*, Leung's *City at the End of Time*, and jam ismail's experimental projects should be interpreted through a diasporic framework. The poetry of these Hong Kong poets can be understood as conceptual, thematic, and formal attempts to explore group identity through cultural kinship without physical or political bonds, to work out how to separate nationhood from statehood.

Hong Kong literature, in Chinese and in English, is rarely analyzed or even read outside of Hong Kong and Taiwan. Preeminent comparative literature scholar David Der-wei Wang explains that "Hong Kong is not known for its literature, but in the past few decades many writers there have been quietly engaging in pure literary creation" (80). A partial explanation for this phenomenon can be found by looking at the Hong Kong film industry, which is caught in a bind of deciding whether to cater to "big-budget Putonghua co-productions for the Chinese nation or mak[e] regional films for Cantonese speakers in southern China and the rest of the world" (Pang 140). Hong Kong writers are similarly caught between these two market choices, but without the benefit of "the rest of the world" having a popular interest in their works. In his Preface to the English translation of *Atlas*, Dung affirms that unlike the international successes of Hong Kong's movies and pop songs, "Hong Kong literature attracts minimal attention—not just internationally but even in mainland China" (xii). When we narrow it down further to poetry specifically, there is even less attention. A thorough bibliography put together by Agnes Lam that compiles all of the major literary texts of Hong Kong cites 71 works produced in the 1990s; of those, only fifteen are poetry collections or anthologies that include some poetry. Native Hong Kong poets of any ethnicity writing in English in Hong Kong are the rarest of all, and there are very few whom Lam classifies as "currently visible on the literary scene" (53).

Film scholar Laikwan Pang further points out that "the use of dialect in the mass media has always been a political matter, particularly in China," and Hong Kong films of "the last two decades are marked not only by the strong cultural identity of a (post)colonial city but also by its strong linguistic identity" (142). Speaking Cantonese helps solidify the previously-discussed sense of distinct identity that Hong Kongers have, but it also keeps the audience for their cultural output limited. *Atlas*, even in its English version self-translated by Dung, contains numerous occasions of Cantonese punning and wordplay as it plays with the relationships between places and their names. For example, chapter one of "Theory" lists pairs of places that share the same or similar pronunciations, but the effect is lost in their English translations: "Red River and Incense Harbor (also known as Fragrant Harbor), Big Load and Big Pool, Nine Lanes and Nine Dragons, Gate of Ceremonial Garments and Gate of Carps, Gate of the Fiery Head and Gate of the Buddhist Hall" (4), etc. In my own reading experience, I found that the passage only made full sense when I mentally translated the place names back to Cantonese ("Red River" and "Incense Harbor" become *Hung Kong* and *Hong Kong*, for instance) before continuing to read in English. Readers of the English version who do not speak Cantonese have to take the author's word for it that they are near-homonyms.

The political interplay between English, written Chinese, spoken Cantonese, and other languages is also important to the work of Leung Ping-kwan and Jam Ismail in addition to Dung, and will be examined later in this chapter through the framework of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "minor literature." For the moment, however, I would like to focus on a different effect of floating between Cantonese and English: it preserves the essential "Hong Kongness" forwarded by the book as an intangible yet nevertheless undeniable feeling, but also runs the risk of putting readers off. Without the universal language of action scenes and photogenic actors that

films can utilize, Hong Kong's cultural singularity isolates Hong Kong literature. Wang claims that "Dung is significant not only because he is content with his isolation there, but also because he can thus take advantage of it and work against prevailing trends," allowing him to create "an imaginary place entirely different from that found in the literature of either mainland China or Taiwan. In a very particular sense, his works are an echo of the perceptual structure known as 'Hong Kong'" (80). The idea of Hong Kong itself as an imaginary place, not just in fiction or literature but in everyday perception, is one that recurs in many academic works and is yet another concept that is complemented by a diasporic reading of *Atlas*.

Imagining a City: Dung Kai-cheung's *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*

Set in some distant future, *Atlas* is framed from the point of view of future archaeologists who imaginatively reconstruct the long-lost city of Hong Kong, at some point in future history re-named Victoria but still clearly understood as Hong Kong. Using old maps, written records, and anecdotes passed down through the ages, some of which actually exist in our world but by no means all, these future archaeologists defamiliarize commonplace notions of space, place, and representation through outlandish readings (and "readings") of maps. The book is divided into four sections called "Theory," "The City," "Streets," and "Signs." Each section has a different tone and a different set of archives—"Theory," for example, mostly reads Victorian and early colonial maps of Hong Kong through bizarre and occasionally fictional cartographic theories such as "antiplace," "nonplace," and "omnitopia," while "Streets" consists of local legends and occasionally fictional anecdotes about how certain streets in Hong Kong got their names—but the sections all work together to "challenge the representation of place, history and culture by displaying a new geo-graphy (earth description)" (Busiol 214). How Dung's place descriptions call into question the reliability of the land itself point us to a diasporic reading, while the fluidity

and innovativeness of his place descriptions are artistic enactments of the fluidity and innovativeness of Hong Kong identity.

As stated previously, postcolonial and nationalistic frameworks are much more commonly used to interpret Hong Kong art and the case of Hong Kong itself, but *Atlas* vastly complicates those interpretive positions. By postcolonial, I mean both interpretations that see the repatriation of Hong Kong from Britain to PRC as a decolonizing event that rights a past imperial violence, as well as those that see the disproportionate power of the PRC over Hong Kong's population as a new situation of colonial dominance. A brief example would be Rey Chow's 1998 essay "King Kong in Hong Kong: Watching the 'Handover' from the USA," which reminds us of the unjust "gunboat diplomacy" used by Britain to forcibly take territory from China in the first place, but also voices concerns about the PRC's total lack of interest in democracy for the Hong Kong people. Often but not necessarily related to these views is the nationalist position of wanting Hong Kong to claim sovereign independence as its own nation, free from either colonizer. One example of a nationalist reading is political scientist and transnational studies scholar William Callahan's interpretation of *Atlas*. Callahan sees *Atlas* as resisting British and Mainland Chinese sovereignty through calling into question either political power's authority to make maps:

The Atlas thus makes sense of Hong Kong's messy history at the intersection of two empires by deploying a set of eccentric cartographic concepts. [...] Dung's complex approach to cartography thus shifts from the conventions of a two-dimensional map to an overlapping and multiple space that undermines the hegemonic understanding of the modern notion of territorial sovereignty. (116-18)

While Callahan's overall interpretation of *Atlas* is beautiful and has many points of agreement with my own, his phrasing in this particular segment has the curious effect of a double effacement of Hong Kong. First, it seems to claim that *Atlas* revolves not so much around the distinctiveness of Hong Kong as around a reaction against the authority of the PRC and Britain. Second, it then moves on to see *Atlas* as a story not really about Hong Kong but an allegory of all hegemony. This double effacement is contrary to both *Atlas*' almost radical avoidance of taking a position relative to Britain or the PRC and its double reinstatement of Hong Kong's name. In chapter 20, Dung introduces a map called "Plan of the City of Victoria," made 1889. The City of Victoria was one of the first urban settlements in Hong Kong after it became a British colony in 1849, considered the capital of Hong Kong ("Tracing the Story of the Victoria City"). Victoria also becomes the name that Dung's future archaeologists come to call the long-lost city, despite clearly using maps and stories of Hong Kong as their archive. However, through some slight magical realism—or at least what feels like references to magical thinking—Dung also traces the presence of the name "Hong Kong" back to a map called "Macao Roads," drawn by British traders in 1810 (3), and even "A Coastal Map of Guangdong," drawn by Guo Fei in "the late sixteenth century" (9). Additionally, even after it is gradually revealed that the future archaeologists call the city "Victoria" in their time for some unnamed reason, the name "Hong Kong" resurfaces and the narrator(s) slip into calling the city Hong Kong again (129, 148). Thus, Dung makes a claim for the undeniable existence of Hong Kong before it existed after it is gone, thereby resisting impulses to see Hong Kong as about anything else other than itself.

That impulse to see Hong Kong as an allegory for decolonization after Imperial Britain is so strong for some readers because it is the expected lens. Diego Busiol even claims that the chapter "Counterplace" is about how "under the British colonial regime, Hong Kong becomes a

'counterplace,' a place modelled on another place located in Britain. Under Western eyes, it is the act of naming and placing something in speech what allows it to have an identity and to be. Thus the West is image at the other side of Hong Kong's mirror" (216). However, the chapter specifically lists the Cantonese homonym name pairings I have previously quoted as examples of counterplace, and never names a single locale in Britain or indeed outside of Hong Kong at all. While it is certainly easy to be primed by the dominant reading frameworks to think Dung should really be talking about Britain when he talks about Hong Kong, Dung is clearly much more interested in Hong Kong in and of itself. What the chapter does actually claim instead of anything about Western eyes is that through the fantastical idea of counterplace, other imaginary homonym names made up by the narrator "all become possible names (and as such possible places) on the 'Macao Roads' of my memories and longings" (4). The focus is explicitly shifted away from a consideration of Hong Kong's land to a concept of Hong Kong in the mind, which is why the diasporic framework is so productive for interpreting this work.

My construction of the diasporic reading framework is, as previously shown, informed by other theorists such as the Boyarins and Appadurai, especially in the key point of separating the idea of a cultural community of people from the idea of shared land ownership or political control. Dung, in *Atlas*, separates the idea of being a Hong Konger from the idea of having political control over the land that is (or is not) called Hong Kong. Reading Dung's book through this framework uncovers *Atlas* as a navigation of what it means to be a nation without a state or a group of people without a land. Diaspora allows us to make sense of what seems to be a central paradox in *Atlas*: that the very structures of what constitutes a space as space can be called into question, and yet the inhabitants of that space can be said to share an undeniable identity. To be sure, that identity is never fully fixed—Dung clarifies his earlier claim that "the space-time that

is ours" does not mean he argues "for any kind of essentialism, of a pure and original identity that has always been there, static unchanging, and unchangeable" (xiii). Rather, the way he rejects the importance of the land and the state of Hong Kong to instead advocate for the culture and nation of Hong Kong is done through finally arguing that Hong Kong is an imaginary place. A place located in the mind is in some ways less stable than a place agreed upon by authorities on a map, but Boyarin and Boyarin assure us that instability can be another of diaspora's gifts. They propose the term "diasporized" identity, meaning a "disaggregated" identity that is not monolithic and whose many parts can change (109). Diasporized identification is a potent strategy for a population living in the shadow of being handed over from one colonizer to another with no say in its own future, a strategy found not only in *Atlas* but also the poetry of other Hong Kong poets such as Leung Ping-kwan and Jam Ismail.

A crucial element of my own diasporic reading is recognizing that Dung's characterization of Hong Kong as imaginary does not make it lesser than a 'real' place. Dung systematically makes readers question the criteria by which places are considered real, and at the same time he convincingly demonstrates the reality of ideas, dreams, and memories. David Der-wei Wang says of Dung that "he understands ... that no matter whether Hong Kong is a colony or a Special Administrative Region, its history must be in the hands of others, and it is in the process of being invented—yet the identity of the city has become extraordinarily real" (81). Reality in *Atlas* no longer has to be authorized, or even physical. In fact, a lack of authority and physicality is what keeps the real Hong Kong safe, in its precarious 1997-inflected situation. In *Atlas*, a speaker says, "Only places that do not exist can escape being possessed" (17). This simple sentence functions as both a lament and a resistance.

In his essay about the inherent propensity of Hong Kong people for diasporic migration, George C.S. Lin takes issue with how the interpretation of diaspora-based identities as fluid and mobile often ends up at a discourse of "placelessness," because he argues that feelings of shared locales still play very important roles in shaping identities even as people move around. The way of conceptualizing Hong Kong that *Atlas* proposes gives us a way to contend with this issue. Hong Kong people are only placeless if place continues to be attached to geography rather than the imagination. Locality is no longer literal or physical in *Atlas*, as the very first section "Theory" sets up for the rest of the book. As each bizarre theoretical concept is discussed, a recurring trope is used to introduce the views of some rhetorical "other" cartographers whose opinions are not those of the speaker(s). For "misplace," we have certain "cartocentric scholars" who are "totally unconcerned about the correct location" of a place such as Tuen Mun, and only care about

how the 'place' called Tuen Mun is being represented and read. According to this view, all representations of places are simultaneously both right and wrong: in whatever place Tuen Mun appears, it cannot be invalidated by factors exterior to the map. By the same token, anywhere that Tuen Mun appears is destined to be wrong. [...] The map is regarded as the only operational field of spatial senses. (8)

For "displace," we again hear of some other people, not the speaker(s), who espouse a "more radical theory" of displace: "According to this theory, every place on a map is a displace. A place is never itself but is forever displaced by another" (10); and for "extraterritoriality," we hear how "more radical scholars of cartography point out that extraterritoriality means a quality of being rather than an actual place. [...] For them, everything on maps essentially acquires a kind of

extraterritoriality. Through this interpretation, they challenge the power of territorialization" (18) ...and so on, for every concept. In every recurrence of these other theorists, a dichotomy is reiterated between how a place is physically and how it is represented on a map, and the reader is presented with a conflict over which should be prioritized. Ultimately, however, *Atlas* does not support either side of the debate. In the last section, "Signs," comes a statement that can be taken as a thesis of the book, if such an ephemeral work could be said to have something so pedestrian as a thesis. The speakers turn once again to some rhetorical other theorist, saying "Cultural anthropologists have pointed out that the composition of symbols in maps and their explanation are the result of observing and narrating reality, but it might be better to say that they are the projection of a given society's collective consciousness" (142). The speakers come down with a judgement on the issue, and the judgement is that neither reality nor the map is really where placeness can be found—rather, a place is in the collective consciousness of the people.

Given that our strongest sense of that collective consciousness is in the third section of the book, "Streets," it is very important to note that "Streets" is the section that contains the least theoretical terms, the fewest references to factual maps in real life, the most fictional characters and apocryphal anecdotes, and the most usage of surrealism and magical realism. Hector Rodriguez, a film critic, states that *Atlas* "carries out a historical inversion that redeems genres of popular culture excluded from colonial history and grand epic literature" (140). By foregrounding urban legends, cultural myths, word of mouth, and hearsay, *Atlas* reinforces the locating of Hong Kong in the culture of the people rather than in the usual tools of postcolonialism and nationalism that Rodriguez has found to be more common in mainstream films. We will see a similar use of alternative street geography in the upcoming analysis of Leung Ping-Kwan's poems in *City at the End of Time* later in this chapter, as a way to stake out a

Hong Kong of the people rather than of mapping authorities. *Atlas'* criticism of the reliability of maps and those who claim to be able to make them and interpret them culminates in the fact that the book shows no maps at all. Callahan has noted a similarity to Susan Sontag's avoidance of using photos in *On Photography* (118), but I would say that Dung goes one step further. Not only does he resist the discourses of territorial sovereignty by refusing to reproduce its ideological materials, by instead using lush descriptions of "verbal maps," he makes the reader picture maps in their own minds and therefore enact the very processes of imagination that his book ultimately claims are the real site of Hong Kong.

Remembering a City: Leung Ping-kwan's *City at the End of Time*

Defining Hong Kong through a shared imaginary place rather than a physical space is not a survival strategy limited only to *Atlas*. The poetry of Leung Ping-kwan displays a similar interest in alternative geographies, along with Leung's own takes on how memories of the past mix with the present, how to build an identity through active self-fashioning, and how minor languages play a role in these themes. Born in the southern Cantonese-speaking province of Guangdong in 1949 and raised in Hong Kong, Leung typifies the pattern identified by George C.S. Lin in his attempt to hypothesize that Hong Kongers tend to show a predilection for spatial mobility because of the majority ethnic group's roots as a Cantonese minority that moved from China to Hong Kong. Sometimes writing under the penname of Yasi, Leung established himself as a premier literary figure of Hong Kong by producing poetry, novels, essays, criticism, and translations, as well as teaching literature and film studies at several universities. Multiple book awards as well as a Hong Kong Government Medal of Honour attest to not only Leung's popularity and critical esteem, but also to his cultural importance to Hong Kong, a place around

which his poetry constantly circles. In 1993, four years before the 1997 handover, Leung described Hong Kong as

a mixed, hybrid space, a crowded and dangerous space, carnival-like even in times of crisis, heavenly and not far from disasters. It is a field where many forces struggle together, a space we as well as everybody have to find ways to make better use of, but it will also be easily appropriated by other forces, political or economical. This space that is open to us could easily be lost to us. ("Homeless" 2)

The bilingual edition of *City at the End of Time*, which collects poems first written by Leung in the 1980s and 1990s, captures both this precarious sense of space and an exploration of ways to resist the appropriation of spaces through a diasporic poetics.

In her analysis of Leung Ping-kwan's body of work, Rey Chow states that readers should resist the temptation to interpret Hong Kong through what it lacks—political self-determination, a land of its own—or how it compensates for these perceived lacks. Instead, she suggests that Leung's work is best understood as an act of production that takes Hong Kong's British colonial past and Chinese colonial future and remakes something of its own from them. This remaking, Chow writes, "do[es] not seek the impossible task of overturning those origins, nor do they assume the mode of a resentment that envies what Hong Kong never had in the first place. Rather, these representations accept these origins as Hong Kong's fateful difference [...] and invent their own survival space therein" ("Things" n.pag.). To read Leung through this lens is to perform a kind of diasporic reading as I have been defining it, since it asks us to decouple things like governmental sovereignty and land ownership from a sense of Hong Kong identity and community.

The matter of active self-fashioning out of the materials given by historical and political contexts beyond Hong Kong's control is a significant theme in "In Fabric Alley," a poem about an area in Hong Kong once famous for its numerous fabric vendors and stalls. The area's official street names are Gilman St. and Wing On St., now part of the Central Business District. "Fabric Alley" (花布街) is the informal name used by the community to refer to the area, but is not a name printed on maps. Even more poignantly, during the 1990s, the area was rapidly transitioning from fabric shops to being part of the business district. The Chinese version of the poem was first written in 1992, and by the time the English collection came out in 2012, the fabric stalls were a thing of the past and "Fabric Alley" had become expensive real estate in the commerce district. Like the street names noted in Dung's *Atlas*, the geographical emphasis of "In Fabric Alley" is on urban legends and cultural use passed on through generations of word of mouth, rather than on authoritative definitions. Furthermore, the last stanza of "In Fabric Alley" ends with

All these stock images, the layers
of colors superimposed to make old patterns,
their many lyrics gone sour, also their erotic suggestions:
can we really see ourselves remade in any of these?
Yet these are all we see in front of us.
How to go about tailoring something new,
to make it so it wears the body well? (85)

Knowing the historical background I have laid out, it is easy to see these lines as a metaphor for the struggle of creating a community tailored to the needs and desires of Hong Kongers when all they have to work with is "stock images" and "old patterns." Elsewhere in the poem, the fabrics

are described as "thin, translucent silk," "cotton that drags its touch in the fingers, "coarse wool," and their buyers are described as "follow[ing] fashions, deliberately, in and in" (85). The mix of fabrics and styles are old and new, Eastern and Western, but how can one not do more than simply combining the two but actually create something new?

"In Fabric Alley" can be read as a companion poem to "In Ap-liu Street," a poem about another street in Hong Kong famous for what it sells. The word "ap" (鴨) means "duck" in Cantonese, and "Ap-liu" (鴨寮) was the name of an old duck-farming village now long buried by urbanization. Like the aforementioned Fabric Alley, the street's name illustrates the persistence of cultural memory. Ap-liu Street now contains a sprawling flea market that sells new and used electronics and parts, and its constant turnover of merchandise reflects the up-to-the-minute technological changes in the lives of the average Hong Kong consumer. Like "In Fabric Alley," "In Ap-liu Street" is structured in three numbered stanzas. It ends with the lines

You say maybe this place was a famous duck farm,
 And now it's a packed arcade, a paradise of accessories.
 You're looking for a chair as a European garden prop.

The owner says you have to buy the lot, including the useless pieces. (93)

The metaphor for attempting to construct something new for yourself by appropriating old materials is repeated again, but here the poem also addresses why this process is difficult: an outside authority controls not only what supplies you are given, but also takes away your ability to reject any that you do not want to use. Chow suggests that Hong Kong has never had any alternative to colonialism or to capitalist commerce, for those things make up "its only condition of possibility"; however, Hong Kong has "carved out its own space in the past century and a half within the environment permitted by this originary violence, [...] this original exploitation"

(n.pag.). The fabrics in "In Fabric Alley" are literally materials, but they also take on the double meaning of material conditions. The tone of the poem is not so much one of despair over Hong Kong's given conditions as it is one of acceptance and resilience, for, as Leung's co-translator Gordon T. Osing puts it, "The last word is that life goes on there, and will, no matter what happens. Leung's poetry suggests strongly how" (38). Leung's Hong Kong is one that takes the material constraints imposed upon it and reinvents them into opportunities for cultural survival.

Like Dung's *Atlas*, there are moments of significance in *City at the End of Time* that feel as emblematic as a thesis statement. The poem "An Old Colonial Building" is one such moment: if "In Fabric Alley" and "In Ap-liu Street" lay out the stakes and the difficulties of creating a sense of Hong Kong for Hong Kongers that is neither colonial nor nationalistic, then "An Old Colonial Building" suggests one way to actually achieve that creation. The titular building is the Main Building of the University of Hong Kong, the oldest edifice of the oldest university in the city, built in the Edwardian Baroque style popular with the British when it was conceived in 1910.⁵ Written in the same three-part numbered structure of "In Fabric Alley" and "In Ap-Liu Street," "An Old Colonial Building" ends thus:

Might all the pieces of ruins put together present
yet another architecture? Ridiculous the great heads on money,
laughable the straight faces running things. We pass in this corridor
in the changing surfaces of the pond by chance
our reflections rippling a little. We'd rather not bend;
neither of us are in love with flags or fireworks.
So what's left are these fragmentary, unrepresentative words,

⁵ Note: the info is from the building's page at HKU's website:
<http://www.hku.hk/visit/campusbuilding.php?m=heritage&t=dm&bdg=main>

not uttered amidst the buildings of chrome and glass, but beside
 a circular pond riddled with patterns of moving signs. (87)

The "great heads on money" and the "flags or fireworks" stand in for the frameworks of postcoloniality and nationalism previously explained in this chapter as common ways to understand Hong Kong in light of 1997. Not only does the speaker reject these symbols, he confidently assumes that "we" do as well, speaking for his interlocutor and perhaps also for his reader. Instead of the solid materials for building traditional nations based on state power, the materials for building "yet another architecture" are made of ephemeral things. They are shared experiences and conversations between human subjects, as fleeting as reflections on the surface of a rippling pond.

Other critics such as Esther M.K. Cheung and Yip Fai have noted the proliferation of things in Leung's poetry, which can be understood as a modern reconsideration of the traditional thing poems, or *yongwu shi* (詠物詩), in classical Chinese poetry. Rey Chow argues that the consumption of things in Leung's poems is not consumption "in the sense of passive mass indoctrination but in the sense of the use of objects by those who are not the producers, in spaces that were not intended for them. [...] Consumption is the representational mode of those Michel de Certeau calls 'the weak,' who 'must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them'" ("Things" n.pag.). To make sense of consumption as a kind of active production, de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* gives the example of laws, practices, and representations thrust upon indigenous cultures by Spanish colonizers. The natives can be said to "consume" those things

to ends other than those of their conquerors; they made something else out of them;
 they subverted them from within—not by rejecting them or by transforming them

(though that occurred as well), but by many different ways of using them in the service of rules, customs or convictions foreign to the colonization which they could not escape (31-2).

This kind of consumption occurs when users divert the dominant system without leaving it. In doing so, "procedures of consumption maintain their difference in the very space that the occupier [is] organizing" (32). Leung's use of objects, from the money and architecture put to new use in their poetic negation, to the transient things like words and reflections, enacts this kind of consumption. The furniture set at the end of "In Fabric Alley" that symbolizes the task of creating something anew from what is given can also be seen as objects of consumption: the end of the poem leaves open the question of what 'you' will do with "the useless pieces," but whatever it is it will necessarily not be the intended use of the colonizers who made them. Leung's things are always ordinary things, and their politicization comes precisely from their ordinariness. In his poetry, he builds a Hong Kong out of the things that signify everyday life, because in diaspora culture is defined by lived experience rather than sovereignty.

All three of Leung's poems discussed above also explore how echoes of the past create a *mélange* with the material present. New fashions are overlaid on top of memories of styles from seasons past, new markets are literally built on top of both old farms and outdated shops, colonial buildings are repurposed from the inside out even as their exteriors are maintained as monuments by the government. Memories are just as important to the experience of the now as what is tangibly present. This foregrounding of memory is another major component of reading diasporically, as so much of diasporic culture, not only in the Asian diaspora but in the global movements of communities across the world, is concerned with the preservation of origins and traditions. In Leung's poems, this common diasporic theme gains the specificity of Hong

Kongers' fraught relationships to urban spaces and how quickly they are bought and sold by public and private businesses outside of an average citizen's control. Based on a performance art piece by the dancer Mui Cheuk-yin that was televised on Radio Television Hong Kong, in which Mui performed on the cobblestones of Ladder Street in a pair of wooden clogs, "The Clogs" is a poem about the persistence of memory in the constantly changing spaces of Hong Kong. In it, bygone voices echo through the use of parentheses and intermix with present voices until it becomes difficult to tell which is which:

Clothes poles pointed to their years, their days hung out to dry.

("Clothes poles! Get your clothes poles here!")

Memory is like scissors. ("Any scissors to grind? Knives to sharpen?")

Memory cut lots of things into silhouettes. (83)

Ladder Street is located in the Sheung Wan district, where some of the oldest buildings in Hong Kong still stand. Although street vendors such as sellers of bamboo poles or sharpeners of blades no longer yell in this street to advertise their wares now that "modern buildings shot up" in the district (83) their voices remain in the memory and take on an uncanny presence. When the speaker, walking through the street, just barely hears "a jump-rope song, 'the flowers bloomed then, one and ten...'" (83) over the sound of cars, it is impossible for the reader to tell whether the speaker is actually hearing it or if it is also a memory. The line is in quotation marks but not in parentheses, and the Chinese version of the line ("那時.....花開.....一十一") (82) uses ellipses to elide parts of the rhyme but leaves enough to be unmistakably recognizable. It is one of those traditional playground rhymes that would fit in just as appropriately in the speaker's past as it would in his present, and thus contributes to the effect of blurring past and present through the use of vocalizations. Ironically, the speaker's attempt to philosophize on the theme of time's

passage is taken over by the reassertions of the past's presence, complicating telos. Ackbar Abbas has called the cultural space of Hong Kong "a heteroclite space made up of different speeds and times; a space particularly resistant to linear or chronological modes of representation" ("Last Emporium" 43). Spaces of resistance to linear chronology may be a good way to describe not only Hong Kong but also many diasporic communities, where shared memories are not only passed on like heirlooms but also incorporated into ways of living in the present as a hybrid subject.

Leung's frequent use of locales on one hand emphasizes Hong Kong's physical landscape, but on the other hand I argue that it also paradoxically allows us to further separate the idea of shared community from shared land, because he prioritizes one's memory relationship to the locale over the actual locale itself. The poem "At the North Point Car Ferry" was first written in 1974, but was deliberately chosen for republication in *City at the End of Time* to evoke "the changing context of the city in the new millennium" (Cheung 8). In the wake of the post-handover government's decision to demolish iconic old piers such as the Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier, the relationship between memories and landmarks plays a role in the public policy debates about how Hong Kong's urban planning favours real estate development, but also serves as a rallying point for citizens to criticize policies that affect their communities but that they have no real say in. Vanished and vanishing places like ferry piers and historic districts live on representationally in Leung's poems, but beyond that he asserts that their importance is more symbolic than physical. The way that internal thoughts, remembered voices, and memory associations form a layer that floats overtop (or, alternatively, lurks beneath) the material street in "The Clogs" is reminiscent of Dung's alternative topography in *Atlas*, which takes place in a future where all of Hong Kong has vanished and yet remains so symbolically important in

memory that it is the focus of an entire book. Unlike the physical landscape, this alternative topography is not at the mercy of political and economic forces. Resistance to and protests against these forces are important and should be supported, but for communities that have no realistic chance of gaining sovereignty in the near future, both Dung's and Leung's approach to Hong Kong identity offers an imaginative alternative to giving up.

The Chinese version of "The Clogs" (木屐) also features lines from classical Chinese poems. Although it is beyond my understanding of Chinese poetry to be able to closely analyze those allusions, even the knowledge that those lines are there adds further depth to how Leung's work explores the way communities are built around shared referents. In a conversation with his co-translator Gordon T. Osing, Leung says that the classical lines are "juxtaposed with direct, common language, even street talk in Hong Kong. They comment on each other and help [him] explore various levels of things" (203). Elsewhere in that same discussion, Leung points out that Hong Kong's relationship with China is actually multiple relationships with multiple Chinas: the classical China of poetic tradition is not the same as the Cultural Revolution China that drove many Mainland writers to take refuge in Hong Kong, which is again not the same as the China to which Hong Kong was handed over in 1997. Leung's use of the antique juxtaposed with the contemporary comes from a subject position of negotiating these multiple relationships with an artistic heritage that comes from the same place as an oppressive regime, and the addition of English—also an official language of Hong Kong—adds to the complexity of this position.

Translation, as an exercise and a theme, draws attention to the liminality of diasporic subjects, who often find themselves not only between cultures but also between languages. Both Dung and Leung did their own translations for *Atlas* and *City at the End of Time*, which makes the translation process itself a part of their work. It goes beyond the scope of this project to do

any comparative readings of the originals against the translations, but I do want to briefly touch upon how translation is connected to diasporic reading. The poems in *City at the End of Time* are presented in both Chinese and English formats, side-by-side, inviting bilingual readers to read both versions and visually reminding all readers that the poems are in translation. American poet Gordon T. Osing was a resident at the University of Hong Kong Departments of Comparative Literature and English and worked together with Leung over the course of two years to translate his poems into English. He describes the joint process as "conversations" (197), while Leung elaborates to say that it was done through "arguments, negotiations, and continuous dialogue" (220). The two poets did not simply transpose from one language to the other—the interactive creative process caused Leung to rethink his expressions in both the originals and the translations, which demonstrates that neither language is more immutable than the other. Ouyang Yu, a Chinese Australian poet who has engaged extensively in translating his own work, points out that "self-translation" is not a commonly accepted term. He feels that translation is often visualized as a one-way route with a disproportionate focus on loss, rather than on what is "gained in translation." As a self-translator, he thinks of it as a task "to recreate myself in an activity that enhances rather than reduces the quality of my writing in the target language" (195). Unlike Frost's famous dictum that "poetry is what is lost in translation," Ouyang proposes that "poetry is what is gained in self-translation" (195). The gainful and generative aspects of dwelling between languages as a diasporic poet are present in *Atlas* and *City at the End of Time*, and will return again as we look at the work of Jam Ismail later.

As a diasporic poet, Leung is not only thinking between Chinese and English, and between different kinds of "Chineses" as previously discussed; he is also acutely aware of his movement between different Englishes. Public television and radio stations in Hong Kong often

run short segments that teach people how to speak English through useful phrases and idiomatic expressions. Leung observes that "it seems that they always teach people to speak like Westerners in a western situation, or like somebody in the service business, serving or doing business with Westerners. It is a pity that people do not teach the student as a Hong Kong person to express himself in an indigenous situation" (221). In his self-translations, he is not only translating between languages but also inside the language of English. The dominant English is taught as a second language in Hong Kong, rather than any of the minority Englishes developed by those under colonization, despite the fact that as minority subjects Hong Kongers may be able to better express themselves through a minority English. In fact, Leung immediately goes on to say that "African and Indian writers who want to change English as a means of expression for indigenous culture" could be "good examples for new ways of using the language" (221). Here, Leung explicitly positions his work as a poet in a larger global network of other postcolonial and diasporic communities working within English.

According to Rey Chow, by "[a]rticulating a space between English and Chinese, between standard Chinese and Cantonese, Leung's poems constitute the kind of 'minor literature written in a major language' that is spoken of by Deleuze and Guattari" ("Things" n.pag.). In an interview with Fred Wah,⁶ Leung also links English not only to colonial class but economic class as well, since English speakers in Hong Kong "came to represent an elite class in society" that could afford to study at an English university and get good government and international business jobs (145). His initial resistance to writing in English was a resistance to both colonization and commercialization, but over time he came to see that "creative works—including underground writings" could represent "other usages of English" (145) beyond the service of imperialism and capitalism.

⁶ "Objects of Resistance: An Interview with Hong Kong Poet Leung Ping-Kwan," collected in Wah's *Faking It*.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature is very useful for tying together Leung's use of language and translation with his political significance as a Hong Kong writer and as a writer of work that can be read diasporically. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari write that "the three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation" (18). Literatures written by a minority in the language of the majority have "a high coefficient of deterritorialization"⁷ (16) because through the act of domination, the majority that dictates language use ironically drives minorities not (only) into linguistic assimilation but (also) into appropriating this forced language for their own uses. The bilingualism of *City at the End of Time* heightens the deterritorialization of language, for whether he is writing in English or Chinese Leung is writing in the context of a Hong Konger under the domination of Britain or China. His use of the personal and the everyday as a way into political themes corresponds with the second characteristic of a minor literature, which is that "everything in [a minor literature] is political" because the context of its social milieu is the story of its oppression rather than a mere backdrop; "the individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it" (Deleuze and Guattari 17). Finally, the third characteristic of a minor literature is that "everything takes on a collective value [...] because talent isn't abundant in a minor literature, [so] there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that 'master' and that could be separated from a collective enunciation" (17). This point certainly rings true in the context of Agnes Lam's statistics about the scarcity of Hong Kong poets, and allows us see Leung not as an exceptional outlier but as a part of a collection that includes Dung and jam

⁷ Deterritorialization is a concept Deleuze and Guattari first coined in *Anti-Oedipus* as a psychoanalytic term for capitalist times. More broadly, however, it refers to an understanding of globalization that attends to how cultural and social relations can be disembedded from the idea of space.

ismail,⁸ another Hong Kong and diasporic poet who has collaborated with Leung at joint readings and shared multimedia exhibitions such as Vancouver's *City at the End of Time: Hong Kong 1997*.

Minor literature is a concept that can be applied in different fields of theory, and the anthology edited by Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's explores how it applies in the context of transnationalism. While transnationalism has many crossovers with diaspora studies, scholars Braziel and Mannur differentiate diaspora from transnationalism "in that diaspora refers specifically to the movement—forced or voluntary—of people from one or more nation states to another," whereas "[t]ransnationalism speaks to larger, more impersonal forces—specifically, those of globalization and global capitalism" (8). Where transnationalism includes the movement of people as well as goods, capital, information, etc. across national borders, diaspora is specifically focused on the lived experiences of human subjects. Further developing the concept of minor literature, Lionnet and Shih point out that "[m]ore often than not, minority subjects identify themselves in opposition to a dominant discourse rather than vis-a-vis each other and other minority groups" (2). Moreover, defining a minor literature tends to have what Seiji M. Lippit calls "a double function of both deterritorializing a major literature or language and also providing its necessary boundary or limit" (283). Reading minor literatures through a diasporic framework is therefore important because it allows us to see the ways in which minority subjects form community with each other beyond a contrasting relationship to the majority. It allows us to see how poets such as Leung, Dung, and ismail connect to each other, and see the different ways their works actively reject identifications that are based solely on centralizing a dominant group by defining themselves against it. My analysis of *Atlas* demonstrates that it resists making Hong

⁸ Jamila Ismail prefers to style her name as jam ismail, and sometimes as jam. ismail. I will be omitting the period for simplicity's sake but will refer to her as "jam ismail" or "ismail" for the rest of this dissertation.

Kong an allegory for British colonialism by emphasizing that Hong Kong is a symbol of itself and not of others, while many poems in *City at the End of Time* stress the task of fashioning something original for the people in spite of and beyond the rule of British, Chinese, and indeed any government. And, as we will see shortly, in the next section, the linguistic and formal construction of jam ismail's "from the *Diction Air*" is explicitly designed to show how minor languages interact.

Verbalizing a City: jam ismail's "from the *Diction Air*"

A survey of jam ismail's biographical blurbs in various publications quickly reveals that they are not written as most 'about the author' sections usually are. Asian Canadian scholar Larissa Lai interprets ismail's famously quirky blurbs as part of her performance of her "fraught relationship to both language and the self," and therefore "her biographical notes are as much a part of her practice as her poetry itself" (162). In a recent biography on the online experimental poetry collection *Softblow*, ismail describes herself thus:

language-hobbyist jam ismail materialized in the british crown colony of hong kong, 1940. contexts past & present include: *koran*, *masculinities without men* (hongkong); ezra pound, *sacred texts of the east* (edmonton); frantz fanon, lisa robertson (vancouver); henry corbin, hamid dabashi (london); *gayatri mantram* (bangalore). jam studied & taught in hong kong & western canadian departments of english. her graffiti include: 'from *diction air* ' (1989), 'from *scared texts* ' (1991), 'translit-' (1997), & 'perch' (2001). [...] jam lives in the special administrative region of hong kong, china.

Lai's point is evident in how ismail calls herself a much more playful and provisional "language-hobbyist" and "graffiti" artist rather than the more authoritative "writer," and in how she marks

the places she has lived through the texts she has read and calls them both "contexts" that define her as a subject. By tracing her preoccupation with translation, hybridity, and language through her work "from the *Diction Air*," I want to show how the diasporic approach reveals complex layers that would not be as apparent in the lesbian and feminist reading lenses more commonly employed to understand her work. In addition, ismail's attention to and experimentation with form allow us to see how the diasporic approach is useful beyond thematic analyses and how it can help us make connections among formally experimental works by other writers in the Asian diaspora.

"From the *Diction Air*" is a series of excerpts from an imagined dictionary of ismail's creation. Various published as chapbooks and excerpts in literary magazines, each version presents different parts of the dictionary by listing words and what seem to be definitions but upon closer examination are prose poems that heavily incorporate puns, linguistic breakdowns, free associations, and collage materials. The version I am working with for this chapter is the most oft-cited one, first published as a chapbook and later reproduced in the feminist journal *Tessera*. It contains a selection of words from the P, R, S, and W sections of the dictionary and also includes an afterword. The formatting is automatically calls to mind the shape of a dictionary, with words in alphabetical order bolded and justified left, and their "definitions" indented and justified right. This visual effect immediately foregrounds the issue of language as both a system and a construction, for dictionaries are places that denaturalize words from their day-to-day contexts.

Translation in "from the *Diction Air*" is not merely the process of converting from one language to another, but a poetic process in and of itself. Like Leung Ping-kwan, and like Ouyang Yu, ismail is acutely aware of the creative dimension of how language changes as it

moves through different contexts. Yip Fai, in a recorded conversation with Leung, connects the productive legacy of Ezra Pound's "infamous misreading of Chinese poetry" to Leung's work in the sense that it illuminates the interaction of different cultures ("Dancing in Quartet" 240). The spirit of Pound certainly haunts much of modern Asian poetry in English, not only for the orientalist fantasies he injected into the popular poetic imagination but also for the ways in which his amplification of Ernst Fenollosa's mistaken understanding of written Chinese and his incredibly loose translations of Chinese poetry opened up the field of interpretation. Michael Alexander goes as far as to call those poems "remakes" rather than translations, and posits that precisely because of Pound's lack of true knowledge of Chinese, "even when possessed by the urge to identity, he could not copy language or form but had to translate, accepting difference and seeking equivalence rather than identity" (24). Ismail, who was herself a Pound scholar in her early academic work in the 1970s, both takes up and subverts Pound's poetics of remaking in "from the *Diction Air*" by revealing what is embedded in language for multi-lingual and mono-lingual speakers. In the afterword section, she discusses how the word "serendipity" comes from an Arabic "corruption" (her scare quotes) of a Sanskrit word, onto which "an englishman hitched -ity [...] english a word by romanizing an arabesque of sanskrit & grafting on a latin tail" (42). She further goes on to write, "in the 1960s in hong kong./ herstory comes & history goes and sensor's always here./ it bothered me that the word was plucked from native tongues i did not speak./ i dint want to ape the brits, stopped passing it, it went in bardo with other words i couldn't use until/ , well, untilled" (42).⁹ Even within the single language of English, there are

⁹ A note about bardos, interesting in how it too is related to ismail's point about the multiplicities within language: the Tibetan word "bardo" refers to transitional states between life and death. Buddhists believe that certain verses can reach people after death as their spirits reside in certain bardos, and hold ceremonies in which monks chant to contact them on behalf of living loved ones. From my own personal experience of temples that practice in both Cantonese and English, in Hong Kong and in Canada, these chants are phonetically transliterated from Sanskrit

multiple languages. This multiplicity comes from not only linguistic evolution but also colonialism, so that the act of using English is always already translating and also participating in a colonial history.

The translation happening in "from the *Diction Air*" is therefore not always employed in its most usual application, inter-lingually, between two languages; ismail also draws our attention to translation intra-lingually, within just one language. Her mixed use of intra-English translation and inter-lingual translation points to the similarities and difference between them. Both kinds of translation build upon the complexity of meaning making, by exceeding the limits of monolinguality to express concepts more prevalent or more easily accessed in other cultures. However, both also suggest very different power relations to dominant language depending on the location of the user. Colonists in a privileged position can count on others to learn their native tongue and provide translations for them without any reciprocal expectation for the reverse, and they can also "graft" on "latin tails" to other languages to assimilate them into the dominant tongue. Conversely, learning another language can be a matter of survival for minorities under imperialism, and even if they "dint want to ape the brits" they may have no choice but to become English speakers and therefore become part of the system that colonizes other languages.

Elena Basile, another of the few critics who have engaged with ismail's work, approaches these tensions from the point of view of post-colonial translation studies at large. She states that, "In the writings of many contemporary theorists (Bhabha; Friedman; Glissant), translation increasingly figures as a key trope for articulating these phenomena of multiple border-crossings and the specific problems attendant on their geographical and socio-symbolic locations" (152). In

rather than translated, just as the word "bar do" itself is transliterated Tibetan.

this context, ismail can be observed to use an "*already minor* English, specifically a *racially* minoritized relation to the imperial language, which she cannot inhabit freely without first taking stock of her own internal displacement in it" (161). Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature resurfaces here, as a way to understand how language is not only a vehicle or container for thematic concerns but is itself an extension of content. Language, even when it seems to be singular, is always "a schizophrenic melange, a Harlequin costume in which very different functions of language and distinct centres of power are played out" (Deleuze and Guattari 26). Ismail's multi-layered translations do exactly what Deleuze and Guattari say is the hallmark of making a minor use of literature: "to make use of the polylingualism of one's own language [...], to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality" (26-27).

But ismail responds to the oppressedness and oppressiveness of different Englishes with more than anguish—she also manages it through play and productivity. "From the *Diction Air*" demonstrates how to create anew using colonialism as what Rey Chow called "a condition of possibility" ("Things" n.pag.) rather than as the end point as desired by the British and Chinese forces in power. One example of this playful productiveness comes from ismail's definition for the word "prefix," in which she gives the example of "con-" as a prefix meaning "with." Using this logic, "concur" is defined as "girl in skiblue jacket, alsatian (german shepherd) alongside her bicycling" (37). She is con cur, i.e. with a dog. It is a joyful pun, a ludic violation of language that shows being between cultures is not necessarily all pain and struggle; it is also a freedom and richness of hybrid perspectives that opens up the subject to fresh opportunities. The same punning is also employed to more poignant effect with "concord," which is defined as "with strings, attached" (37). It is literally con cord, but is also a statement that harmony or agreement comes with conditions attached. As a grammatical term, concord is the agreement between words

in gender, number, case, person, etc., and from her position as a lesbian feminist writer ismail is using this defamiliarizing of English to comment on how identity comes attached with strings of agreement. Later in the piece, ismail more explicitly details her technique of using her hybrid position to make English do new things: "but a colonizing onomatopoeia (ceylon became a crown colony in 1802) needn't be an onomatopoeer./ one could learn by it to resuffix *paris-ian* with an *-ite*, or decline 'british' to 'brutish./ me, i like e.s.l. trips, such as 'united sates'" (42). By taking "ESL trips," the language can be turned against the colonial powers that made English the dominant language in the first place, critiquing them using the subtle displacement of vowels more usually seen as mistakes made by speakers of English as a second language. I am reminded here of Leung Ping-kwan's use of ordinary things in his poetry to enact what Rey Chow identifies as a kind of political consumption, by employing objects for ends beyond those intended by the conquerors. ismail's things are words and linguistic elements, and she produces a new dictionary for subversive consumption.

Lai calls this taking back of language through inter- and intra-lingual hybridity a "fragmented and multiplied dwelling in language," which to a polycultural subject "gives the lie to any chance of a coherent ontology, however much such a thing might be desired and politically expedient" (167). This statement brings us back to how diasporic reading, both for Hong Kong literature and more generally, allows us to see themes of self-fashioning beyond the available means of definition. The poetic work of ismail, a subject of diaspora at the conjunction of multiple cultures without one physical place, explores ways to separate cultural identity from thenation-state, including through playing with national languages. Ismail focuses on particular words to "articulate the multilingual echoes at play in their sounds, and in this way disrupt[s] the unitary fiction of distinct language systems and mak[es] space for new meanings to emerge

between the lines of historically saturated cultural palimpsests" (Basile 155). Like *Atlas*, and like so many of Leung Ping-kwan's poems analyzed in this chapter, a dominant motif in "from the *Diction Air*" involves the recognition of unsatisfactory conditions beyond one's control and, despite or because of that recognition, creating something different for oneself.

Under the definition of the word "well," ismail demonstrates the process of creating something of one's own out of what is given, through the form of erasure poetry. In what feels like a direct reference to Pound and Fenollosa's misreading of Chinese, ismail inserts a photocopy of a section from Léon Wieger's book on Chinese characters. Wieger was a French Jesuit missionary who worked in China at the turn of the century, and who wrote books on the Chinese written language still used by Westerners learning traditional Chinese today in the form of what are called Wieger tables, which lists words by radicals, or the discrete graphic components of a written Chinese word. ismail photocopies a list of six words with the same root radical accompanied by brief descriptions of each word's definitions and usages by Wieger. But, rather than letting Wieger speak for what those Chinese words mean, ismail has reworked this excerpt into her own erasure poetry, calling it a "copywhite": "well what i did was, i phtocopied [*sic*] wieger and then i whited out the words & punctuation i didn't want, with liquid paper" (40). The translations are quite literally remade, through a tangible physical process, into poetic lines such as "O expend to expose/ our excessive reckless now" (40).

Like the figure of "you" in Leung's "In Ap-liu Street" who wants to buy just one single chair as a European garden prop, ismail has to "buy the lot, including the useless pieces" (*City at the End of Time* 93) and then figure out what to do with all the pieces. One solution she comes to is collage: the process of reclamation through cutting up and re-contextualizing, used not only in her "copywhite" but also several other places in "from the *Diction Air*." In her definition of

"race," for example, she includes an inset diagram from a Webster's dictionary, possibly a 1949 illustrated edition, depicting a circular racetrack with a fragmented caption saying "A contest of speed" (38). Next to this picture is prose poetry about ismail's mother, who has "come down from near shanghai, been in the colony 18 years, hairdressing, refers to the mainlanders as 'they', is joining her family in toronto, and, do you prefer hong kong? or vancouver, she asks, splitting," "a day later i read in a book of ackbar's 'writing is precisely working in the in-between' (helen cixous)" (38). The "colony" is Hong Kong, unnamed by the speaker until her mother says it aloud, and the migration traced by this passage is a complex yet very typical web of diasporic movement from China to Hong Kong to Canada. "Ackbar" is of course Ackbar Abbas, who references Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa." Cixous writes about intersubjectivity, or being between selves, which transposed to the context of diaspora in Hong Kong can also be about being between spaces. This bricolage of allusions is juxtaposed with the illustration of the racetrack as representative of a contest of speed, when Abbas has called Hong Kong a place of multiple speeds. The resultant effect is one of multiplicity, a headlong rush of composite differences that ought to be in competition but are instead somehow working together.

Using form to achieve this effect fits into a field of poetics identified by influential Asian Canadian poet Fred Wah as "a poetics of ethnicity," or "alienethnic poetics." Wah uses these terms to characterize the work of writers who use "tactics of refusal and reterritorialization" rather than "alignment with mainstream and traditional strategies" (51); these tactics are practically achieved through "more formal innovative possibilities" (52). He is specifically speaking to a Canadian context when he talks about taking up a position of "applied, chosen, desired, and necessary estrangement" against "inherited literary forms and language" (60), since these inheritances may be different in other historical, cultural, and national contexts. His

application of these terms to jam ismail reminds us that she is a diasporic subject based as much in Edmonton and Vancouver as she is in Hong Kong and Calcutta. In the same breath, Wah calls ismail's prose poetry reminiscent of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (which I will analyse much more extensively in the next chapter) and calls ismail herself "a mix—Chinese, Muslim, Indian, somewhat of a Pound scholar, half the year in Vancouver, half in Hong Kong, and so forth" (116-17). But these places—indeed, the idea of place in general, is for Wah "a rhetorical device used to generate poems" rather than a reification of identity (Dyck 198). For Wah, as for all of the writers whom we read diasporically in this chapter, the place is the idea rather than the physical property; "the ultimate place for Wah is the language itself. Since language is 'the true practice of thought,' his topos is fitly ... identical with the mind—not the mind in *stasis*, but the mind in *process*." (198). The next chapter of my dissertation will further explore the connection between experimental form and ethnic expression. Wah calls it a "synchronous foreignicity [...] of embracing antithesis, polarity, confusion, and opposition as the day-to-day household harmony," and abruptly quotes "Jam Ismail: 'Read this book from right to left, reader dear' (n.p.)" as an illustration of this idea ("Poetics" 61). Experimenting with form, genre, and mixed media is a key tactic for writers in the Asian diaspora who, as people who live between languages and cultures, are interested in calling into question the constraints of language itself.

Conclusion

Diasporic reading, as I have demonstrated it in this chapter, offers different advantages and emphases for understanding Hong Kong poetry from the more common frameworks of nationalist and postcolonial readings. Works such as *Atlas* by Dung Kai-cheung, *City at the End of Time* by Leung Ping-kwan, and "from the *Diction Air*" by jam ismail share preoccupations with transient positions between languages, places, times, and political subjectivities. Through

the use of translation and form, and through meditations on alternative cartographies and hybridity, what these works ultimately explore is the possibilities of defining a shared place not as physical land with governmental recognition, but as an imagined space defined by the people for the people. This diasporic understanding of a shared physical space can apply to larger diasporas beyond Hong Kong. Of course, the defining of a collective identity through shared experience and memory is not unique to diasporas; other groups from the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class to sub-cultures that share affinities, interests, hobbies, or activities can and do also construct identities in this way. However, diasporas are comparable in scale to a national identity, but are divorced from a nation-state. Additionally, a diasporic community does not exist *despite* not sharing a physical location, but *because* of not sharing one land. The community is specifically built around the virtuality of the spaces they imagine they share—a theme that will resurface throughout my other chapters about the Asian diaspora and cyberspace.

As compelling as the diasporic framework is for reading cultural resistance in *Atlas, City at the End of Time*, and "from the *Diction Air*," it does also have certain limitations. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's reservations about the turn toward diaspora theory and what she calls "denationalization" are about a very specific Asian American context and not a purely conceptual use of "diaspora" as in my chapter, but her work has salient points that can carry over to reservations about a diasporic conceptualization of Hong Kong. Basically, the diasporic framework is very vulnerable to depoliticization. Wong argues that minority groups can gain political power by tying themselves to the land that they inhabit, not by abstracting themselves from it. Marginalized groups must insist on certain rights that come with inhabitation. From this stance, my reading of Leung, Dung, and to some extent ismail that turns away from a Hong

Kong nation based on geography or state power to a Hong Kong nation of the mind looks dangerously like a denationalization that would invite neo-colonial powers, whether the juggernaut of the nearby PRC or the global reach of America or any other capitalists with a stake in owning part of Hong Kong, to disregard the Hong Kong people and do whatever they want.

Wong's criticism of denationalization is a very pertinent limitation of the diasporic framework I propose, but from the point of view of those who find power in an imaginary Hong Kong, even with its limitations it is a theoretical strategy rooted in realism. Neo-colonial powers are already doing whatever they want. For average Hong Kongers, left out of decisions made about the land they inhabit since the creation of the British colony, to pretend that they can claim a conventional nationalism rooted in land control and state recognition may in fact be the more unrealistic dream. Sheldon Lu acknowledges that "diasporic citizenship is without the blessing of a secure national affiliation, but it can be ultimately turned into a source of agency and creative transformation in the ... new world order" (285-6). In Hong Kong's distinct situation, the strategies of Asian Americans "claiming America" are not available, and therefore the way diaspora lets us to decouple the idea of nation from state allows the Hong Kong nation to survive, if only in the imagination.

In 2000, as the Internet was starting to become an increasingly major aspect of people's everyday lives, Wong added a new introduction to a reprinting of her "Denationalization Reconsidered" essay to include a consideration of cyberspace. "Cyberspace," she writes, "has been theorized as a leveler of physical and social differences, a home to all affiliative 'imagined communities,' and the ultimate deterritorializer—'denationalizer,' if you will" (125). Wong understands the Asian American activism community as being founded on "an awareness of, and commitment to resisting, inequalities imposed on the racialized, gendered, sexualized, classed,

and otherwise marked bodies," and argues that "links between Asians in diaspora are facilitated by the Internet; Asian Americans have been heavily involved in high-tech in a wide range of roles from assemblers and engineers to entrepreneurs and consumers" (125). I feel that this addendum allows me to clarify how I see the contributions of diasporic reading to literature in relation to other readings. I do not bring up Wong's criticisms in order to strike down arguments against the diasporic approach—I am genuinely interested in the limits of the approach I suggest, because I am interested in using it alongside other approaches such as nationalism, postcolonialism, feminism, transnationalism, etc. so that they can supplement each other, rather than claiming that any one lens of interpretation could possibly be holistic.

Where the Internet has in some ways been a 'denationalizer,' with both the positive and negative effects argued by Wong, in other ways it has created new inequalities based around technological access. The heavy involvement of Asian Americans and other members of the Asian diaspora around the world in this new age of the Internet merits further exploration in analyses of Asian diasporic literature. Furthermore, Wong's essay reminds us that everybody in the Asian diaspora is also an Asian in some nation-state, if not politically then at least practically speaking, because we all physically live somewhere. The Hong Kong people's condition of being diasporic is precisely because of they reside or once resided in territory owned by first Britain and then the People's Republic of China. The kind of nationalism Wong advocates can work together with denationalization, in my sense of diasporic reading. One can support the Umbrella Revolution, while at the same time supporting the various ways an intangible community sustains itself beyond that revolution after its leaders are jailed, as we will see in our journey from this chapter to chapter four.

Chapter Two. The Shape of Things: Aesthetic Experimentation in the Asian Diaspora

As we established in chapter one, to read diasporically is to re-imagine both space and community. Rather than being solid, singular, immutable things, they are abstract and hybrid and can be shared by those who share memories, experiences, and political stakes even if they do not share physical presence. In experimental works such as jam ismail and Jamelie Hassan's collaborative *Jamelie-Jamila Project* (1991), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982), and Walter K. Lew's *Excerpts from ΔIKTH/DIKTE for DICTEE* (1982) (1991), these essential principles of diaspora as a reading framework come to the fore not only in content but also in form. In this chapter, I suggest that the insights we gain by reading formally experimental works in the context of a larger Asian diaspora are different from those we get through reading in other ways. Diasporic reading is most productive when we think of it as one way to read rather than the definitive way to read, because there are aspects of *Dictée* and the other works in this chapter that are better understood through the lenses of nationalism, feminism, and more. I am not arguing that reading diasporically should replace those frameworks, but that it should complement them, because I am also arguing that the traditionally dominant modes used for interpreting the works examined in this chapter are not enough. Diasporic reading is needed to add important new dimensions to our understanding of them.

The texts in this chapter are connected by their interest in experimental form and their approximate chronological closeness to each other, as works of the 80s and early 90s. These works by poets in the Asian diaspora build upon and further develop diasporic reading, as already defined in chapter one through the case study of Hong Kong. I argue that diasporic reading is a crucial approach for reading these texts because diaspora as a concept allows us to

move past the go-to binaries—such as form vs. content or personal vs. political—that tend to dominate discussions of experimental work by ethnic writers.

To make this argument clearer, this chapter will be divided into three main subsections. The first subsection shows what diasporic reading, as already defined in chapter one, can do for reading formally experimental works such as ismail and Hassan's *Jamelie-Jamila Project*. As we have previously established, the diasporic framework is in contrast to nationalist and postcolonial frameworks, and it gives priority to an abstract conceptualization of shared spaces rather than physically defined space. Furthermore, the minority literatures of diaspora emphasize a multiplicity of networks between minor cultures rather than a traditional immigrant narrative of one minor culture to one major culture. By analyzing various critical interpretations of Cha's *Dictée*, I also suggest that interpreting through a diasporic lens would allow us to move beyond nationalist or postcolonial readings, and indeed beyond other common binaries, as I will show in subsection two. Asian diasporic works with experimental form are often plotted along binary spectrums that pit form against content, experimental against ethnic aesthetics, a focus on narrative against a focus on language, etc. To read diasporically is to see how these categories work together rather than in opposition, and to see that these works position themselves at multiple points along the spectrums at different times to different effect. Finally, in the third subsection, I show how diasporic readings move us not only beyond binary thinking but also into multiplicities of identities and styles, with a focused analysis of Lew's *Excerpts* in relation to *Dictée* and how it can be read as an argument for a pan-ethnic Asian identity for a global Asian diaspora. In the conclusion to this chapter, I also touch upon the breaking down of distinctions between subject and object in highly interactive works such as the ones we investigate in this

chapter. This breakdown becomes an increasing interest in this dissertation as it moves towards Asian diasporic literature in the age of cyberspace.

When I say 'experimental form,' I am mostly alluding to how it is characterized in Fred Wah's critical work, which we will explore in more depth shortly. One of the central tenets of his theorizations is that the best approach to express the multiple identity of a minority writer in diaspora is through multiple form, multiple language, multiple style. Wah has worked with and is strongly influenced by the creative and theoretical work of Charles Bernstein, quoting him multiple times in *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity*, a collection of Wah's critical writings. Bernstein states in *A Poetics* that "Too often, the works selected to represent cultural diversity are those that accept the model of representation assumed by the dominant culture in the first place" (6). He criticizes the way that "difference is confined to subject matter and thematic material, a.k.a. local color, excluding the formal innovations that challenge those dominant paradigms of representations" (6). This context is crucial to understanding the stakes of Wah's claim that innovative forms fundamentally make the most sense for expressing marginalized experiences. The works I engage with in this chapter are significant for insisting upon the expression of Asian diasporic identity *through* experimental forms in some way. Hassan, ismail, Cha, and Lew all use experimental forms to achieve their poetic interrogations of space, place, memory, nation, language, selfhood, and more. The *Jamelie-Jamila Project* is an assemblage of texts and objects that Hassan and ismail call a "bookwork," one that explores and expands outward from the historical trajectories of their similar first names. *Dictée* "blurs conventions of genre, further troubling the categories upon which both dominant and ethnic literary canonizations depend," through "the formal fragmentation which underlies *Dictée*'s aesthetic [that] renders the text a complex object with regard to critical theories" (Lowe 37). Similarly,

Excerpts from ΔIKTH/DIKTE for DICTEE (1982) is a book that "operates on so many principles at once, and takes such advantage of collage techniques of image/text juxtaposition, that it is certainly a book that has to be 'seen to be believed'," as well as a book that "exists somewhere between languages ... exhibiting the polyglot sensibility of the cultural exile which is emblematic of Cha's work" (Stefans, *Before* 61-2).¹⁰ While these works are valuable as Asian American and Asian Canadian texts, they also exceed these nation-based labels. Reading them as a grouping of Asian diasporic work changes the emphasis from cultural nationalism to shared experience and memory removed from one concrete space or land, which allows us to see alternative points of interpretation.

Besides his astute theorizations of minority writing by poets such as ismail, Wah is also a renowned Asian Canadian poet in his own right, as well as an influential scholar and teacher of poetics. He was appointed Canada's fifth Parliamentary Poet Laureate in December of 2011, and has gained recognition for his literary work in the form of three major poetry prizes: the Governor General's Award, the Stephanson Award, and the Dorothy Livesay Prize for Poetry. His poetry enacts his own critical theory, and his approach can be summarized by a term he has coined called "alienethnic poetics." We can look to *Faking It* for further details about what an alienethnic poetic would consist of, according to Wah. In "Strangle One," Wah declares that "to write in poetry is to move past the comfort of a ruled discourse" (20). He immediately establishes, therefore, that poetic writing is or should be in and of itself anti-authoritarian in some sense. He goes on to expand upon what it means for a minority writer to write in poetry in the essay called "A Poetics of Ethnicity," say that "the position of applied, chosen, desired, and necessary estrangement ... has become a primary unit of composition for many Canadian writers

¹⁰ From Stefans' "A Search for Lost Time: A review of Walter K. Lew's 'Excerpts from Δikth/DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)'," collected in *Before Starting Over*.

as they seek to deterritorialize inherited literary forms and language" (60). Again, he emphasizes the point that poets deliberately seek to deviate from dominant discourse, but now he adds that it does not simply happen just by writing poetry or indeed just by being ethnic—it must be purposefully chosen. This choice is enacted through poetics that "embrac[e] antithesis, polarity, confusion, and opposition" (61) and explore "more formal innovative possibilities" (52), rather than mainstream and traditional strategies such as linear narrative or lyric poetry, which Wah feels are colonized and inherited forms.

There is a logical reason that these poetics have an "ethnic imprint" even though other writers not of ethnic minorities may also use them: they "frequently originat[e] from the necessity to complicate difference" (Wah 52) and so they make the most sense for writers who are "marginalized, invisible, experimental, political, and in need of any tool that might imagine a culture that could recognize an alien identity and construct a common language of the other" (66). What this language means, in practice, is not only a refusal of canonically dominant poetic forms, but also a heightened attention to grammatical construction and critiques of grammar, to the unstable relationship between words and meanings, and to the materiality of words themselves. It is of course important to acknowledge that despite Wah's forceful insistence on the natural suitability of experimental form for ethnic expression, avant-garde poetics in the mainstream imagination is often seen as the domain white male writers. Wah's work is as much a response against this pigeonholing as it is a manifesto for his own position. Wah is making an argument for his fellow ethnic writers, readers, and those beyond the writer/reader dichotomy to be unafraid in taking avant-garde techniques back from this imagined elite, to use the tools that fit their sensibilities. In answering that call, poets like Jam Ismail, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Walter K. Lew, Brian Kim Stefans, and Fred Wah use the language of the other for "what it can

do that a more transparent and conventional poetic cannot," which is "articulate our complicity with language whenever we use it to formalize a public space for ourselves" (131). This is especially pertinent for hybrid writers, multicultural writers, and diasporic writers, who are always in minority positions of being betwixt and between, no matter where they are.

But it is important to note that Wah's identity politics are not reductive: Jeff Derksen's analysis of Wah's poetry points out that his project is "not to define *an* identity that can then be projected across all social barriers (a kind of simplistic nationalism) but to track or map potential identities of a subject that is decentred by multitemporality" (164). His use of form contributes to how he achieves this project, and even Wah's theoretical work is mediated through experimental form. *Faking It* is a collection of critical writings intercut with a "strangle" between each paper, documenting his personal relationships to specific lines of poetry written by others. And in his own poetry, Wah enacts "embodied perceptual processes in language," as critic Louis Cabri puts it (xiii). Embodiment is the thread that connects his formal experimentation with his political practice. Poetry is bodily—the physical sensations of seeing and hearing words, the materiality of silence and paper and ink—and often so is the lived experience of race: your skin and hair colour, your family's food, the blows from your childhood bullies who single out difference through violence. It is therefore also no coincidence that the works I analyze in this chapter all devote some emphasis to the text as physical object and the act of reading as physical perception and interaction.

The Diasporic Reading Framework Applied to Experimental Form and the Asian Diaspora

The experimental nature of "from the *Diction Air*," as seen in the previous chapter, is not an outlier in jam ismail's work. Hybridity of form and language is one of the main through lines of her oeuvre. Another of her pieces that lends itself well to diasporic reading as we have already

defined it is the *Jamelie-Jamila Project*, a "collaborative bookwork" made in partnership with Lebanese-Canadian artist Jamelie Hassan. Part chapbook and part art book, the *Jamelie-Jamila Project* opens up like a trifold to reveal folder pockets that hold various inserts and a stapled booklet of poetry. Printed on the trifold itself are images of everyday life in Gaza. Reminiscent of the subversive consumption of everyday things diverted from their intended use in Leung Ping-kwan's poetry, objects in *Jamelie-Jamila Project's* folder include a bookmark, hand-drawn pictures, loose cards with short poetry, a teabag, a photo of the view of Hong Kong from Cheung Chau, and photocopies of news clippings about Israel and Palestine. On the teabag's packaging are the printed words "Genuine Tea: Yunnan tuoicha" in English, with Chinese words repeating the same thing underneath. The teabag is folded inside of a card in which a poem is printed on the facing side, entitled "a woman from india asks, what does 'lesbian' mean? a woman from pakistan replies." The poem is both about how outside forces try to impose definitions upon sexuality and about how words themselves have fluid meanings that change with context and expectations. These themes of how language shifts and how power is expressed through language, also seen in "from the *Diction Air*," carry through the rest of the *Jamelie-Jamila Project*. One of the most notable news clippings is a brief column about how the Arabic word "intifada" is banned from utterance in Israel. Another object in the folder pocket is a greeting card decorated with a child's drawing of three children holding slingshots and other toy weapons. Inside the card is "Season's Greetings" on an otherwise blank side, and on the other side a description in Arabic, French, and English that says, "The work of children in occupied Palestine: Paintings of a 15-years-old refugee girl from Rafah refugee camp. The subject of these paintings is: The Intifada (The uprising). The painting in the words of the girl herself: 'Let us play, so that we can live like other children of the world.'"

Language is such a central theme of this work that it puts the first poem in the stapled booklet into a new light. Entitled "apchrlneeeio" and written by ismail, it is a sound poem very distinctly in the style of another experimental Canadian poet, bpnichol. Beyond the total abstraction of meaning by reducing words to sounds, however, the broader context of ismail's work tunes the reader into the concept of sound across multiple languages, and how the pronunciation of English vowels is different not just from other languages but also different when spoken by speakers of other languages. Written Arabic, French, Chinese, and English are used throughout the *Project*, affirming the unique and specific backgrounds of the authors and also pitching readers who are not fluent in all of them into moments of estrangement. This is a multilingual technique also used in Cha's *Dictée* and Walter K. Lew's *Excerpts from ΔIKTH/DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)*, and will be explored in more depth later in this chapter. Multilingualism also allows ismail and Hassan and other writers to draw attention to how language itself is created and formed like any man-made structure, as Charles Bernstein notes in *A Poetics*: "To come to a language as a second tongue, to rethink and relearn the world in new and strange sounds, may inhibit a natural or unconscious acceptance of the relation of words to things. It may bring home the artificialness of language" (108). The very genesis of the *Project* comes from one of those quirks of language that ismail explores in "from the *Diction Air*": how different words can come from a shared root, and how their histories reveal things about the history of the world and how languages have travelled. The *Jamelie-Jamila Project* is about two different women who share a first name with the same root, and what is similar and dissimilar between them.

A shared name may seem like a very surface similarity, but as curator and visual arts scholar Monika Kin Gagnon notes, "a remarkable complexity emerges from this seemingly

haphazard juxtaposition" (159), not just of their names but also of all the objects, images, and words in the *Project*. All of these things are united by a general evocation of anti-colonial resistance and feminist subjectivities, but the tangentially related things are ultimately placed together for the reader to make connections between them. Gagnon astutely observes that "The serendipitous slippages across cultures and histories, of which Jamelie and Jamila are only partly in control, seems to be the exact point" (159). Serendipitous: this very word that ismail used so eloquently in "from the *Diction Air*" to illustrate how signs of translation and of colonialism are already embedded within English, now also used as a perfect description of how something as seemingly random and beyond one's control as a given name brings constellations of identities together. To further emphasize this point, there is another piece in the stapled booklet called "nom sequitur," in which ismail catalogues several others with similar names. There, she commemorates Jamilah Buhrayd, and Algerian Fronte de Liberation Nationale member, tortured and executed by the French in 1957; Djamila Boupacha, another FLN agent tortured and imprisoned by the French in 1960; a Jamila Ismail born Carol Phillips from Vancouver and converted later to Islam; a poem called *Jamila* by Kirghiz writer Genghis Aitmatov; and, to round out the list, a short biography of jamila ismail the poet herself.

Names function as words in and of themselves, as a representation of a collection of ideas about identity, as well as a way to mark affinity towards others, and in this sense places do a similar thing. The diasporic sensibility of the *Jamelie-Jamila Project* is epitomized in the most well-known poem from the booklet, "ratio quality," often quoted by scholars such as Fred Wah and Larissa Lai and even included in the anthology *City Voices: Hong Kong Writing in English 1945 to the Present* edited by Michael Ingham and Xu Xi. The poem in full reads thus:

young ban yen

had been thought italian in
 kathmandu, filipina in hong kong,
 eurasian in kyoto, japanese in
 anchorage, dismal in london england,
 hindu in edmonton,
 generic oriental in calgary, western
 canadian in ottawa, anglo-phone in
 montreal, métis in jasper, eskimo at
 hudson's bay department store.
 vietnamese in chinatown, tibetan in
 vancouver, commie at the u.s.
 border.
 on the whole very asian.

The pattern of repetition and the listing of multiple places is reminiscent of the way ismail writes her own author biographies, as discussed in the previous chapter. A person who is "very asian" is also someone defined by the context of multiple places, and constantly in flux. It is a statement about hybridity, and the anxiety that it causes within those who try to place the subject within one definite category. But their reactions also reveal each location's most common anxieties and prejudices about the Other—the assumption of a domestic worker from the Philippines in affluent Hong Kong, a "Western Canadian" in the nation's eastern and stereotypically self-centred capital, an Anglophone in a Francophone province constantly uneasy about language sovereignty, communist when trying to enter America. Gagnon summarizes that "each characterization speaks less of its 'very asian' subject than of the social context of its utterance"

(75). The poem's conclusion that Young Ban Yen is "on the whole very asian" can be interpreted as a reference how Asian immigrants are seen as 'perpetual outsiders' around the diaspora, even though the constant fluctuation of identities is also shown to be not a quality unique to Asians but something that happens to all. Asianness is conceived of as something not defined by one physical space, not even a space as large as 'Asia,' but as the shared experience of shifting expectations.

The unique physical form of the *Jamelie-Jamila Project* is essential to facilitating how the reader experiences its themes of naming, language, places, shifting identities, and moving beyond a physical conception of shared land. Hassan and ismail use a multitude of techniques to both make commentary about their themes and also literalize them through the reader. Hybridity, for example, is a central concern of many of the poems in the booklet, and the *Project* itself is also a hybrid text. Clippings from news reports included with the other artifacts and quotations from CNN news coverage used in poems are a kind of found poetry or redirected poetry. "The apparently straight truths of contemporary media or politics are recontextualized," Lai states, "to reveal a repressed content, a surplus unknown and unintended by the original speaker that perversely permits not only the speaker's survival, but his/her/its ability to thrive" (177). Another form of recontextualization happens through the lack of order in the items in the *Project*, which forces the reader to make his or her own choices in physically arranging the text. The creators' desires to decentre, decolonize, and defamiliarize are performed in some small scale through the very act of interacting with the text, as the creators cede authority to the reader and the reader is confronted with how one's own personal history, cultural context, knowledge of languages and references, and aesthetic preferences strongly shape a unique and always changing experience of the text. This ceding of the traditional hierarchy in the reader/creator relationship will also

become a very significant topic in the next chapter, as we move into early experimentations with electronic poetry in the Asian diaspora. Anti-authoritarian intent can be understood as part of what I argue to be an important advantage in reading experimental Asian texts diasporically: it moves us beyond conventionally accepted frameworks of understanding and departs from linear relationships to emphasize networks of multiple connections instead.

Wah identifies an overarching anti-hierarchical interest in Asian diasporic work as well. Of the curation of *Premonitions*, an anthology of Asian North American poetry edited by Walter K. Lew, Wah writes: "his collection also seeks consciously to drive a wedge into lyric's monism" "to make space for trespass and its necessary innovations" (111-12). Brian Kim Stefans also takes *Premonitions*, published in 1995, as a starting point for grouping together the writing strategies of poets of Asian descent who write against conventional forms. Stefans points out that there is something that links elements of their poetics without necessarily also linking their past history and communication with each other, "at least not in the manner that many poetry movements have [been linked] in the past" (72). It was not until the publication of *Premonitions*, Stefans claims, that poets such as Cha, Lew, Tan Lin, Roy Miki, Fred Wah, etc. "could even be considered a constellation of experimental ethnic poets"; despite the fact that one poetry anthology "hardly constitutes community, at least as a lived in malleable social space, it does make manifest a series of disparate tendencies in a way that, finally, should create the atmosphere of exploration into literary *difference*" (72). In this chapter, I cover works by Jamelie Hassan, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Walter K. Lew that can be grouped together by this 'series of disparate tendencies.' They share the label of Asian diasporic poetry that uses formal experimentation coming from shared experiences and relations to dominant culture, even if the writers do not belong to a group or school of writers in the more usual sense.

These key works were produced in the 1980s and early 90s, immediately before the proliferation of the Internet for personal use and the accompanying expansion of digital technologies that became available for the use of further poetic and artistic play with form.

Although reader reception to and acceptance of Wah's experimental ethnic poetry in Canada was very different from the reception to Cha's work in America, as we will see in more detail in the next subsection, the point still stands that Anglophone Asian writers in both countries and in diaspora were experimenting with form, regardless of how people received it. The literary and immigration histories of Canada gave Wah more room in his context to theorize the reasons for racialized writers to use innovative forms, but Cha was still producing works like *Dictée* even without a context that made it readily comprehensible to her American audience at the time. In "Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric Poetic," Wah writes that he is "bothered" by raced writers who do choose to write in more mainstream forms, "that seemingly solid lyric subject ground I can't trust" (109). This unease comes from his sense that the use of normative, lyrical poetics by minority writers often tends to coincide with the depoliticization of race into an easily consumed multicultural flavour. Wah does concede that an argument could be made in defence of writers who choose to go that route, "along the lines of a necessary mimesis of the other. A racialized poetics might, for some writers, necessitate the adoption of the dominant form of poetic 'speaking' as a way of securing some platform of stability and complicity with power, or, as the case may be, as a critical ironizing" (113). In general, however, and similar to Stefans' claims, Wah sees a commonality around which community can be built in what racialized *and* experimental poets are trying to do, in contrast to poets who are neither or just one. Stefans' essay "Remote Parsee" is an attempt to account for the wide range of "alternative" poetry by writers of Asian descent, and he goes back in time to recuperate not only Cha into his

theorization of the tactics of "ethnic language" but also draw attention to Ronald Tanaka, who wrote in a 1978 article entitled "Towards a Systems Analysis of Ethnic Minority Literature" that "ethnic literature can be seen as the attempt by a majority culture to deal with the hermeneutic problems created by the necessity of cross-cultural communication" (qtd in Stefans 72).

Some features common to Asian experimental poets from Tanaka through the present include a connection to the visual arts (Cha's and Lew's links to experimental film, for example, and Roy Kiyooka's work as a painter and photographer who influenced Roy Miki and Fred Wah) and their heightened use of multiple media, hybrid forms, and non-linearity. Stefans' logic here is not that these artists share these traits uniquely among themselves, but rather that their sharing of these features and also of a racialized diasporic experience is consequential. These writers "are forced into a consideration of the Western literary tradition, especially the 'avant-garde,' in a peculiar way because of a vague sense of membership in a racially defined community that often is not loyal to the various binaries" (99). The scope of Stefans' argument, like my own, focuses primarily on writers after the sixties, because "as writers like Ismail, Masada, Wah, and Yau show this loosening of the grip of the sign created an open space for dialogic cultural negotiation or 'deterritorialization' that wasn't a clear option for ... pre-seventies Asian American writers" (99). Perhaps unlike "Remote Parsee," however, I am less interested in a project of categorization, or of creating a sort of identification guide to Asian diasporic experimental poets based on their traits. Instead, I am interested in asking where the assumption that they are all connected can take us. As I have shown in this section, experimental form is an existing sub-category of Asian poetry that benefits from being read under the grouping of Asian diaspora. I showed how and why we should do that kind of reading with my analysis of the *Jamelie-Jamila Project*. The way we have already defined a diasporic reading framework in chapter one was

productive for that analysis, but the interpretations and conclusions that came to light also gesture toward the further development of features of diasporic reading when applied to experimental works. Using a diasporic lens to read Cha's *Dictée* and the various critical and artistic responses surrounding it, I show in the next section how a diasporic reading moves us past established binaries.

Moving Beyond Binaries through Diasporic Reading

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, first published in 1982, also uses formal innovation as an essential part of its technique. In attempting to describe it for a reader, as I am now doing, critics have variously called it a novel, an autobiography, an epic poem, a bricolage, a mixed-media text, and more. Arranged into nine chapters named after the Muses of Greek mythology, *Dictée* offers no linear narrative or plot development;¹¹ instead, it accumulates a variety of writing modes, including but not limited to memoir, French dictation, Catholic confession, historical documentation, verse, folktale, and translation, as well as non-written media such as photographs and anatomical diagrams. *Dictée* may not seem too outlandish in the context of Ismail and Hassan's work, but in its own cultural and historical context, it is recognized as one of the earliest works of the Asian American canon to be known for its experimental form.

Born in Korea, Cha immigrated with her family to America in her early adolescence and during her post-secondary education studied film theory in France. Her family's complex relationship to the history of Korea as well as her experiences as a multiple immigrant are thematically featured in *Dictée*, though these things have not always been accorded significance

¹¹ Even the construct of chapters itself offers more mystification than a sense of organization: the subjects assigned to each Muse do not necessarily correspond with the content of the chapters in any obvious way; the order of the chapters do not posit any clear relationship between them; and one of the Muses, Euterpe, has been replaced by an invention named "Elitere" that is not a reference to anything else found elsewhere.

in its reading reception. Most recently, Jim Cocola has stated that for Cha, "displacement, loss, and recuperation define the Korean experience both on the Korean Peninsula and in diaspora" (159). This shared experience of living within a politically divided home country and living away from it is reminiscent of the Hong Kong sense of diaspora I theorized in chapter one. Feelings of being diasporic can happen even before one's displacement from the physical homeland due to changing political situations. Diasporic reading, as already defined, is a strategy that adds valuable new interpretations to the existing readings that people have already done of *Dictée*. These new interpretations also go to highlight that existing readings are mostly predicated on binary oppositions that do not fully encompass what *Dictée* is doing, and so diasporic reading also allows us to push past those oppositional binaries to see the how the text works beyond commonly accepted dichotomies.

Because *Dictée* is one of the most well-known texts in my whole project, I want to present something new by reading it alongside Walter K. Lew's creative and critical response, *Excerpts from ΔIKTH/DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)*, as a sort of double feature, because what they achieve together illuminates many of my ideas about Asian diasporic aesthetics and communities. Before I do that, however, I will draw attention to important previous reading conversations that have taken place about *Dictée*.¹² I mean important in the subjective sense of important for situating the rest of what I want to demonstrate in this chapter—namely, that a diasporic framework allows us to make sense of the formal, thematic, and linguistic content of Cha's *Dictée* and Lew's *Excerpts* by moving past binaries and into multiplicities. The previous conversations tend to focus on conflicting readings of *Dictée*, pitched on oppositional axes such as form versus content, experimental versus ethnic, personal versus political. Just like my earlier

¹² I must stress that, since I am drawing attention to arguments that have already been made by other writers, and only summarizing the parts that are relevant to my project at hand, I am not necessarily presenting a complete view. For more detail, please consult the referenced sources themselves, to which I owe a great debt.

exploration of the *Jamelie-Jamila Project* beyond nationalist/postcolonial/feminist readings, I do not aim to make any of these readings of *Dictée* obsolete, as I feel that they all contribute crucial aspects to scholarship about Cha. Rather, I want to show how diasporic reading allows us to gain insights beyond those oppositions.

When it first came out in 1982, *Dictée* was largely ignored by Asian American audiences and read mostly by the white experimental artists in Cha's circles. Throughout most of the 1980s, its explicitly experimental form kept Asian American readers from seeing its ethnic concerns, which were reduced to mere Orientalist decoration by white critics. But in the 1990s, the publication of *Writing Self, Writing Nation* reclaimed *Dictée* as a significant work for Asian Americans and for Korean American women specifically. Timothy Yu's chapter on Cha in *Race and the Avant-Garde* makes a larger argument about how this dichotomy maps onto a chronological development in perceptions of poetic form vs. content in the latter half of the twentieth century. Essentially, Yu argues that Asian American poets formed "an avant-garde, a grouping that defined itself not just through race but through bold experiments with form and style in the search for an Asian American aesthetic" in the 1970s (73). Through the 1980s, however, a first-person lyrical style became most popular in Asian American poetry, and so Asian American poetry as a whole became associated with the "workshop style" that became mainstream in the 80s. Meanwhile, the formal and stylistic experimentation done by the Language poets became seen as the opposite of that mainstream. This bifurcation developed into "a sense of experimental and ethnic writing not as analogous avant-garde formations but as separate projects with separate means and goals" (102).

Thus, when *Dictée* came along in the early 80s, during this time of bifurcation, its immediate hailing as experimental by white avant-gardists sorted it into a camp that did not

grapple with the complexity of its ethnic concerns. Instead, early critics of *Dictée* such as Michael Stephens and Robert Siegle proposed "no way to account for the impact of race on the work beyond the lens of orientalism" (112). Efforts to reclaim *Dictée* for Asian American literature in the early 90s were therefore "explicitly intended as a response to readings such as those by Stephens and Siegle" (113). The preface to *Writing Self, Writing Nation* overtly states that all of the contributors to the volume "shared a sense of urgency about the need to bring Cha's work to the attention of Asian Americans" because of how published conversations about *Dictée* up until that point were "largely ignor[ing] or sidelin[ing] Korea and Korean America in their discussions of the book" (Kim ix). Elaine Kim's essay in the collection, "Poised on the In-between," also censures "readers who, in their eagerness to explore the affinities between *Dictée* and other 'postmodern' texts, have found it possible to discuss Cha's work without alluding in a significant way to her Korean heritage" (22), because she feels it is impossible to truly analyze the work without that context. Yu identifies Kim's call to politicize all readings of *Dictée* not as a simple "corrective" but as "as an attempt to shift the ground of literary-political value within Asian American criticism itself" (113), away from an outdated cultural nationalism that was once helpful in the 60s and 70s toward a new paradigm of hybridity and multiplicity.

Kim's assertion of the category Korean American, rather than just Asian American, ties into this shift by moving away from the Chinese- and Japanese-American domination of the early Asian American literary movement. It also points to how Asians, contrary to persistent stereotypes, are not all the same. American descendants of colonizing Japanese and colonized Korean nationals, for example, would have different relationships to that historical period. Although Kim does see that Cha challenges the reliability and indeed even the existence of fixed labels, Kim still claims that "Cha insists on the specificity of her Korean American identity. For

her, the in-between is a personal dwelling place that makes survival possible" (21). In addition, Kim is interested in attaching her sense of racialized nationalism in *Dictée* to gendered experience: "To discuss *Dictée* without ever referring to Cha as a Korean American woman is to depoliticize the text and thereby obliterate or at least drastically reduce its oppositional potential and its empowering possibilities for readers" (22). However, it would be too simplistic to say that the nationalistic project is necessarily also feminist in *Dictée*, or that the two cannot be pitched against each other in productive ways. Karen An-hwei Lee points out that the stories behind the "woman warrior" figures in *Dictée* embody both "the revolutionary values of an oppressed people" but also "the nationalist spirit ... [that] explicitly serves the ideologies of patriarchal systems" (64). Nationalist readings that adhere to patriotism necessarily also have implications of patriarchy, sharing the root of the pater. Lee suggests that these women warriors can really be understood as feminist because of *Dictée's* (and, later, *Excerpts'*) diasporic nature—it is not the Korean nationalism but Cha's *transnationalism* that recontextualizes anti-oppressive struggles into a broader claim for female agency rather than an affirmation of patriotism.

Another tension in readings that turn away from a whitewashed avant-gardism to focus on the thematic content of Cha's work is how to reconcile the personal with the political. The very name of the *Writing Self, Writing Nation* anthology literally points to how *Dictée* writes both a personal self and a political nation. L. Hyun Yi Kang's essay in the anthology claims that by using autobiographical elements from Cha's life while shunning other tropes of autobiography such as linear narratives of personal development, *Dictée* shows how "[i]dentity and personal history for Cha is embedded in other persons and histories" (79). But this does not necessarily mean that the personal in *Dictée* is always only found in small signs of larger histories. Viet Thanh Nguyen argues in *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* that

Dictée "rejects [the] domination of the individual through national discourse and the discourses of religion, race, and patriarchy that it sees as related, and it enacts that rejection and its own relationship to the reader, challenging conventional modes of literary consumption." (154). Nguyen finds it difficult to believe that "the critical and political calculus" of *Writing Self*, *Writing Nation* can truly account for the fluidity of identity in *Dictée* that drew the contributors to the text in the first place, as he feels that their ultimate insistence on Korean womanhood counteracts fluid selfhood. Juliana Spahr picks up on a similar conflict in her analysis of *Dictée* in *Everybody's Autonomy*. Against a background of other minority writing, Spahr points out how *Dictée* "complicates the assumption that works which addressed colonialism and/or minority immigrant experience should propose clear selves, group solidarities, easy nationalisms, traditional values, or the preservation of absolute cultures and identities" (126). While its ends are both personal and political, Spahr suggests that *Dictée* works best when readers do not force one end to be in the service of the other. Rather, *Dictée* performs a negotiation "between cultural determinacy and cultural transcendence, employing a sort of fluid particularism" (151-2). The kind of reading that Spahr is suggesting is arguably a diasporized reading, and the value of it is in how it allows the text to occupy multiple positions at once instead of forcing oppositions.

These post-80s interpretations of *Dictée* all pay closer attention to the themes and content that early critics failed to recognize in their de-racializing or sometimes simply Orientalizing analyses of her avant-garde techniques. Timothy Yu cautions that these later reclamations of *Dictée* may go too far the other way, ignoring Cha's formal experimentation rather than bringing it into the field of Asian American study. In particular, he finds that Asian American critics tend to "fall back on biographical and narrative markers, neglecting those parts of *Dictée* that aim precisely to question such identifications" and to "focus on the treatment of Korean history in the

text's early sections" rather than the book's "critically neglected second half" (107). Shelley Sunn Wong, in her entry in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, does make an attempt to connect her feminist reading to the formal subversions of *Dictée*,¹³ and while Kang does not do any close readings of the photographs, diagrams, and other images in what Yu calls the neglected second half of *Dictée*, she does consider their sum total effect on the reader's experience in her essay about how *Dictée* is a text that works through the themes of power and knowledge "in both its content and form" (75).

It is Juliana Spahr, however, who makes the most explicit attempt to not only reconcile the personal and the political but also integrate experimental aesthetics into a racialized and ultimately diasporized reading of *Dictée*. In *Everybody's Autonomy*, Spahr argues that *Dictée*'s form forces the reader to "decolonize" the reading process while *Dictée*'s content thematizes decolonization in Korean and world history. Form and content therefore work together simultaneously. Because the formatting, genre play, and multimodal nature of *Dictée* prevent readers from using traditional literary analysis techniques, Cha "dislodge[s] dominant and externally imposed methods of reading" (Spahr 10). These traditionally dominant methods tend to be uni-directional, where meaning is either dictated from text to reader or from reader to text. Spahr's use of the term "uni-directional" is a reference to a part of *Dictée* where Cha reproduces a letter from the "Koreans of Hawaii" to President Roosevelt protesting the Japanese colonization of Korea. Cha comments that letters, and indeed "the word" as a concept, "appeal to the masses to congeal the information to make bland, mundane, no longer able to transcend their own conspirator method" and are "neutralized to achieve the no-response, to make absorb, to

¹³ "Cha's formal practices throw into relief the ways in which Asian American women writers are caught up within the politics of genre. In working outside of genres such as autobiography or the *Bildungsroman*, which are predicated on developmental narratives, Cha writes against interpellative narratives of assimilation and incorporation" (Wong 106).

submit to the uni-directional correspondance [*sic*]" (33). In place of uni-directionality and all its limits, *Dictée* offers a reciprocal form of reading, one that "involves not simply identifying and assigning meaning to certain works, but also entering into a creative and self-reflexive relation with them" (Spahr 122). By critiquing colonization "not simply [...] on the level of content" but also on the level of reading itself (125), Cha accomplishes what Spahr calls the decolonization of reading: to read in a way that does not replicate the imposition of power from one side to another. Although she is not trying to claim that decolonizing reading is "'enough' or even a top priority of political response," she does "want to suggest that it might be a related project" (122). The act of reading, of interacting with the text, becomes a part of the creative and political project of the text rather than a response to it.

In Yu's opinion, Spahr's attempt to "fuse avant-garde and identity paradigms" (120) and to "combine Asian American and experimental reading positions by insisting on the unity of content and form" falls short of its stated goal, because in the end, "in the encounter between experimental and minority discourses, Spahr arguably allows the former to trump the latter" (121). Yu suggests that this is because while *Dictée* does not necessarily make readers choose between experimental and traditionally ethnic methods of reading, it also does not provide a synthesis of the two: "[r]ather, in its multiple and often clashing structures of organization ... *Dictée* shows us a way of keeping these two paradigms in productive tension, always visible but never resolved" (122). Meanwhile, Jim Cocola takes issue with Spahr's labeling of *Dictée* as "immigrant" rather than "postcolonial" literature wherein "the narrator, like Cha, escapes colonialism through immigration" (Spahr 125-6), because in Cocola's opinion to suggest that "immigration affords a simple escape hatch from colonialism is to minimize colonialism's role as a catalyst for emigration and to deny the persistence of colonization's deleterious effects upon

diasporic populations" (158). Cocola is frustrated by any critic that he construes as forcing a choice onto *Dictée*: "Why can't *DICTEE* count as the work of both immigrant *and* postcolonial literature?" he asks, and in response to Yu's work on *Dictée* he demands "why can't *DICTEE* register as both experimental and Asian American?" (158). While I think Yu does in fact say exactly that *Dictée* can and does register as both, just "in productive tension" rather than synthesis, I still think that Cocola's queries are useful. Although Spahr, Yu, and Cocola see holes in each other's arguments, all three exhibit the same urge to look at the project of *Dictée* in holistic ways, not in the sense of a unified whole but in the sense of seeing more value in 'and' rather than 'either/or.'

I recognize that same urge in my own reading of *Dictée* and the other works in this chapter, because I want the diasporic reading I suggest to not supplant cultural nationalist or feminist or experimental readings, but to supplement them. When Yu suggests that the ideas of "home" and "Korea" are continually deferred in *Dictée*, he also argues that "Cha is not creating what many critics have seen in *Dictée*: a 'hybrid' (Lowe) or 'in-between' (Kim) space that somehow combines or lies between the native and the foreign, the Korean and the American" (129). To simply reduce it to a third space that is a combination of both is to miss that the concept of space is actually negated entirely. "As the discourse of nation falls away," Yu writes, "others emerge to take its place (129), and he goes on to see signs of these others in family, myth, religion, and ultimately writing and language. The idea of a diasporic identity—a personal one, a Korean one, and an Asian one—in which physical space falls away to become an abstract and constantly fluctuating referent allows for a richer understanding of how *Dictée* deals with concepts of home and nation without resorting to the forced oppositions or forced syntheses outlined so far in this section.

A diasporic reading of *Dictée* not only gives more insight into the work in itself, but also gives us a framework for understanding the broader constellation of responses to it and works inspired by it. In particular, Walter K. Lew's *Excerpts from ΔIKTH/DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)* is a work that yields rich results when studied alongside *Dictée* as both a diasporic interpretation of *Dictée* and also a companion work to which we can apply a diasporic reading. In light of Lew's artistic response, Spahr's argument that *Dictée* demands to be read in a decolonizing way becomes more convincing. The existence of *Excerpts* is evidence for the claim that *Dictée* "challenges the forms of reading that subtly remove literature from cultural concerns, from the world that produces and surrounds it" (Spahr 125), because *Excerpts* itself is the result of Lew performing a reading of *Dictée* that is intimately tied to cultural concerns and their worldly contexts.

Although Nguyen feels that *Dictée*'s "representation of identity as fluid and its own inflexibility as a text [...] results in a resistance to critical exegesis" (29), my following analysis of Lew's *Excerpts* suggests that *Dictée* is actually a text that invites the kind of in-depth engagement and analysis that can be called exegesis. Certainly Nguyen is correct if we define exegesis as the authoritative explanation of a text, but *Dictée* is amenable to methods of interpretation that take into account the minutiae of its formal, textual, and contextual details at a level of intensity equal to that of religious exegesis and eisegesis. Where Nguyen feels that "the fluidity of identity that Elaine Kim and L. Hyun Yi Kang note as being one of the hallmark features of the text that attracts them to it is, in the end, a surplus that the critical and political calculus of *Writing Self, Writing Nation* finds difficult to account for" (155), I feel it makes more sense to reverse that equation: the features that make *Dictée* critically and politically difficult to pin down are also the very elements that entice readers into attempting to make their own sense

of it. It would be fair to note that Nguyen's discussion of *Dictée* does not include any mention of Lew's response, and so perhaps the framework into which I wish to bring *Dictée* is outside the scope of Nguyen's interests. However, my following analysis of *Excerpts* through *Dictée* (and vice versa) shows its relevance to the existing critical conversations around *Dictée* and how diasporic reading allows us to move past binary arguments.

At the same time that the scholars behind *Writing Self, Writing Nation* felt that *Dictée* had spent the first decade of its public life being de-racialized by white avant-gardists and ignored by Asian American critics, poet and scholar Walter K. Lew was having a much different experience. Lew, so overwhelmed by the ways in which *Dictée* called to him as a Korean American, as an Asian in diaspora, and as a lover of world literature, spent ten years after the publication of *Dictée* working on a response and homage to it. The result is what he calls a "critical collage," entitled *Excerpts from ΔIKTH/DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)*. The acknowledgements page at the back of *Excerpts* ends with an inscription that reads "New York/Honolulu/Seoul/Paris/K-town/NY, 1982-92," which shows that it was important for Lew to document his geographical and temporal movement as he worked on this project. In addition, Lew was already writing about Cha and *Dictée* as early as 1983. In "A New Decade of Singular Poetry" published in *Bridge*,¹⁴ Lew identifies "five basic genres of Asian American poetry," four of which are familiar themes such as documentary, lyric, satire, and cross-cultural odes, but the fifth he calls "matrices." What

¹⁴ *Bridge* was a magazine of Asian American literature that ran from 1971-1985. At the time of the publication of "A New Decade of Singular Poetry," Lew was the poetry editor for *Bridge*. Although Lew was clearly writing about *Dictée* in both his personal artistic work and in *Bridge*, this fact does not negate the claims of Timothy Yu or the contributors of *Writing Self, Writing Nation* that *Dictée* was not largely read as an Asian American text until long after its publication. *Dictée* was given exposure in *Bridge* because of Lew's position as editor, allowing him to include his personal interests, and in addition *Bridge* had an extremely small circulation—so small, in fact, that it ended because of lack of funding from advertisements and subscriptions (see *The Asian American Movement* by William Wei, 120-122).

he means by that is a form that "employs a wide range of rapidly juxtaposed languages, media, historical frameworks, motifs, and rhetorical moods. It is almost demanded by the normally multi-cultural situation of Asian Americans and the accelerated information flow and collisions of contemporary society in general" (11). Obviously, this type of poetry is not new, but here Lew is explaining why it is a type of poetry that is so particularly fitting for expressing the Asian American experience during the beginning of 'The Information Age.' He then goes on to dedicate the entire poetry section of the Winter 1983 issue of *Bridge* to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, saying, "We never met, but her brilliant book of texts and graphics, *Dictée* ... points to possibilities that any serious Korean American artist should contemplate as we enter a future that threatens essential continuities" (12). The word "threatens" can be interpreted in two different ways here. Essential continuities that connect Asian Americans to formally innovative work are threatened by a future where Asian American writers will be "misguided into writing beneath their talent by an audience that has an impoverished sense of literature" (12), as they give in to the prevailing taste for what is expected of identity politics poetry; and/or the future threatens to impose a set of essentialist continuities onto ethnic writers rather than allowing them to forge new ones. This is the context into which Lew birthed *Excerpts*.

Described by its author as a "critical collage," *Excerpts* is an assemblage of excerpts from other texts, images, photographs, and other visual details that illustrate and expand Lew's interpretation of *Dictée*. Some of the textual excerpts come directly from *Dictée* itself, remixed into new contexts, while others come from texts that influenced Cha (for instance the works of French writer Marguerite Yourcenar, which are never explicitly referred to in *Dictée* but the importance of which Lew makes a very convincing argument for) or are evoked by Cha (Korean folktales, Greek myths, and historical documents, for example). In many ways, *Excerpts* pays

direct homage to *Dictée* by copying its polyglot, mixed media, and filmic techniques. But *Excerpts* also distinguishes itself by the attention it pays to the book as a physical object. All of the images in the book were reproduced into it by photocopying, thereby preserving not only the image but also the creases and marks that were on the items they were copied from. Lew plays with the concept of unintelligibility not only across languages, as in *Dictée*, but also filtered through perception. Photos that are heavily smudged become obscured, reminding us how the mind fills in missing information to create something beyond authorial intention. The first two pages of *Excerpts* are photocopies of the same page from Yourcenar's *Fires*, but with different blurs and smudges so that different parts are made illegible, almost giving the effect of erasure poetry. In the page chosen by Lew, Yourcenar meditates on figures from Greek mythology; the rest of *Fires* is a fragmentary collection of aphorisms, prose poetry, and diary entries. It is easy to see the connection Lew makes between Yourcenar and Cha, but his use of collage and physicality makes this more than an argument about influence: he delves into the themes of *Dictée*, but in many cases he also pushes them to a further end than Cha does.

For example, Lew, like Cha, asks the reader to think about the limits of languages' capacity for expression. *Excerpts* does so not only through code switching, but also uses its physical form to draw attention to the constraints of language, the constraints of our bodies' abilities to perceive, and the ways we make meaning out of things besides language. The first legible sentence in that beginning excerpt from *Fires* reads, "consists of some nine monologues and narratives based on classical Greek stories" (*Excerpts* 2). The number nine calls to mind Cha's repetition of nine: the nine Muses that open *Dictée*, the nine days and nights Demeter wandered the earth in search of her daughter Persephone, "Ninth, Unending series of nines, or nine points linked together" (Cha 173). *Excerpts* draws further attention to the mystical

importance of the number nine: the book measures nine by nine inches, an unusual square shape that accentuates itself every time one lays a hand on it. Another example of Lew's practice of physicality can be seen in his engagement with Cha's motif of blood. Besides creating a section of textual excerpts dealing with blood from Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Dante's *Inferno*, and *P'ansori sosa* by Pak Hwang, collaged with the phrase "sang encre" (French for "blood ink") from *Dictée*, Lew also smeared a dab of his own blood on the back of each copy of *Excerpts*. As the blood ages and oxidizes, it changes in colour and chemistry. Stefans calls it "an articulation of the very metaphysic of decay, of the attempt at reproducing and resurrecting a decayed text, and of the life a text may have in an altered, alternative state," and says that "[t]his sort of attention to the book, to its status as physical artifice with expressive qualities independent of language, is characteristic of *Excerpts*" ("A Search" 62). Not only do the shape of the book and the blood left on its back cover draw our attention to making meaning beyond language, they also make the reader hyper aware of interacting with the book beyond simply reading it. The literally visceral quality of fluids from Lew's very body is a sign of how much of himself, as a physical being, he invested into *Dictée* in order to produce *Excerpts*. *Excerpts* is something that we have to read interactively, but it is also something produced out of interactive reading, which is a crucial concept I will revisit later in this chapter. In a similar vein, *Excerpts* is both a work that we have to read diasporically and also an example of a diasporic reading of its sources. Keeping this in mind allows us to productively interpret how it engages with such themes as nationalism, translation and multilingualism, and readerly community.

As previously discussed, Korean nationalism has been a significant lens through which to which to read *Dictée*, but it is not the only one. Transnationalism is also an important context for both *Dictée* and *Excerpts*, written as they are by diasporic authors over multiple locations. Karen

An-hwei Lee goes so far as to argue that the depictions of nationalist martyr Yu Guan Soon in *Dictée* and *Excerpts* are symptomatic of the movement from Korean culture to Korean-American culture. While female nationalist heroes may embody the revolutionary values of oppressed groups,

the nationalist spirit present in traditional stories about Yu Guan Soon ... explicitly serve the ideologies of patriarchal systems. However, as the stories are transposed from Asia to Asian America in a transnational context, the woman warrior's outstanding execution of traditionally male tasks—fighting in wars, marching to villages, or igniting political protests—is interpreted or re-visioned not to affirm patriarchal nationalist values, but rather, to represent the potential for a female agency. (64)

Lee pinpoints Yu Guan Soon's "transposition to American soil in Theresa Cha's *Dictée* (1982) and Walter Lew's 1992 *Excerpts from: ΔIKTH / DIKTE, for DICTEE (1982)*" as examples of a resurrection, where Yu is brought back to life "as an avenging historical female figure in a transnational context" (65). She calls it an American revisionist phenomenon, but rather than concluding that this is a feminism brought into a patriarchal story by these American revisionists, she claims that the "international transplantation of Yu's story from geographic 'Eastern' to 'Western' soil ... challenges geography-based binary assumptions that the West is feminist and progressive yet the East is antiquated, exotic, and patriarchal" (65). Although her engagement with transnationalism and feminist revision is very compelling to me, I have to admit that I find the thread of her ultimate argument hard to follow. It feels to me that there is too much emphasis on the arrival of Yu's story from Asia to America, and a conclusion that is predicated on 'the East' and 'the West' as endpoints of origin and arrival, rather than focusing on how it is a back

and forth movement. Diasporic therefore makes more sense to me as a label than how Lee uses transnational, because diasporic reading captures how Cha and Lew engage with themes of nationalism and feminism between and across multiple cultures, not travelling from first one to a second but encompassing a broader vision of networks and communities beyond borders. Again, a diasporic framework allows us to move beyond a linear binary and instead into multiplicities.

Lew's treatment of Yu and of a feminine vision of Korean nationalism mostly adds to the aims of Cha's project in *Dictée*. The Yu section of *Excerpts* is a collection of pages from a children's picture book that depicts Yu's childhood leading to her involvement in independence protests. These excerpted passages and illustrations, sometimes repeated or even flipped upside down, are also captioned with French text excerpted from Claude Bérard's "Apocalypses Eleusiniennes." Bérard's essay poetically describes the initiation rituals that were held every year for the cult of Demeter and Persephone in the ancient Greek city of Eleusis. The religious rites include meditating upon and re-enacting the three key phases of the Demeter and Persephone story: Demeter's loss of her daughter, her long search for her, and Persephone's ascent from the underworld to reunite with her mother.¹⁵ This combination of the two stories formally reinforces the link Cha made in *Dictée* between the personal and the political—between female self-sacrifice for the nation and her own mother's sacrifices for her. Cha's reference to the Eleusinian mysteries comes late in *Dictée*, in the last quarter of the work followed by references to other political and sacrificial women such as Joan of Arc, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, and characters from the Korean folktale of Pari Kongju, a princess cast out by her father because he wanted a son but returns to save her dying mother with healing water from a magical spring. Lew also references the folktale of Pari Kongju, but his placement of it at the beginning of *Excerpts* is a

¹⁵ See Martin P. Nilsson's *Greek Popular Religion* for more complete details about the Eleusinian rites.

crucial realignment. By separating it from the section with Yu Guan Soon, Demeter, and Persephone, he draws attention to other themes through re-contextualization.

In *Excerpts*, Lew places new emphasis on the well where Pari Kongju obtained water from the spring. Using quotations from Jung Young Lee's *Korean Shamanistic Rituals*, Lew expands our knowledge of the folktale only alluded to in *Dictée*. We find out that the princess not only had a long and difficult journey to the well, but also worked for the well-keeper for three years because she did not have money for the water, and he only allowed her to take the medicinal water to her mother once she had married him and bore him seven sons. The well therefore becomes a symbol of domination and male control, and Lew juxtaposes it with other structures that signify power: Hadrian's Wall and Poseokjeong. Hadrian's Wall was a massive fortification built for both defence and physically expressing Rome's power in the Ancient Roman province of Britannia, today's England. Poseokjeong is a hand-carved granite water feature built during the Unified Silla period of Ancient Korea (668–935), when it was part of a royal pavilion where Silla kings and nobles gathered to float wine glasses on water specially brought in from the Namsan Valley to fill the Poseokjeong.¹⁶ An illustration of the Poseokjeong historical site, labeled in Hanja and so legible to a Chinese reader such as myself, is inserted without further explanation between a snippet from the Pari Kongju folktale and an excerpt from Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* that reads, "Whatever one does, one always rebuilds the monument in his own way. But it is already something gained to have used only the original stones" (Lew 12). On one level, this quotation is clearly about these ancient relics turned tourist attractions, but we could also easily read it as a metaphor for Lew's own project in *Excerpts*, a

¹⁶ Poseokjeong is Korean for "Stone Abalone Pavilion" and was designated as National Historic Site No. 1 in 1963. For more information, see http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/ATR/SI_EN_3_1_1_1.jsp?cid=264255

monument to *Dictée* using only the 'stones' of excerpts. This double meaning draws our attention specifically to the arrangement of his selected 'stones,' to the fact that he chooses to place the water folktale with the royal water feature and the imperial Roman wall. Female self-sacrifice is associated with Korean nationalism through Cha, but in *Excerpts* now it is also associated with a global legacy of colonial empires and nationalism in general.

Lew immediately follows this section with excerpts from *Dictée*, Dante's *Inferno*, and *Memoirs of Hadrian* on the theme of blood, and then reproduces a historical record of Korean political dissidents that lists their names, their sentences, the names of the prisons they will be sent to, and the locations of the prisons (38-9). The reader's feelings are led to oscillate: sympathy for Korean nationalists, antipathy against the invading Japanese colonizers, suspicion of nationalism as a concept as we are reminded of the fundamental similarity behind all kinds of patriotic drives. As Karen An-hwei Lee reminds us, "the nationalist spirit present in traditional stories about Yu Guan Soon and Fa Mulan, for example, explicitly serve the ideologies of patriarchal systems" (64). Feminist intervention is one way to turn away from this patriarchal ideology, by shifting the focus toward the women's agency rather than the causes their stories were created to advance. Another way is diasporic reading, which allows us to separate the ideals of community from the rapaciousness of land grabbing. We can sympathize with the Korean nationalists without turning automatically to a vision of nationalism defined by owning physical space. By understanding *Excerpts* both as a diasporic reading of *Dictée* and at the same time a work that we can read diasporically, we can see productive ways to go beyond the binary positions imposed by previous reading frameworks and imagine multiplicities instead.

Moving into Multiplicities with Diasporic Reading

Dictée's only textual reference to venerated Korean historical figure Ahn Jung-geun comes in the chapter named after Clio, the muse of history. In this chapter, Cha delves deeply into the life of Yu Guan Soon, and poetically imagines Yu calling upon the spirits of other martyrs before her: "She calls the name Jeanne d'Arc three times./ She calls the name Ahn Joong Kun five times" (28). It makes sense for Cha's purposes that she does not dwell further on Ahn, since he is already revered as a hero in the masculine project of Korean patriotism. The additional focus that Lew puts onto Ahn in *Excerpts*, however, is not a reassertion of a patriarchal lens. Rather, Lew uses Ahn to add a different nuance, to introduce the idea of an Asian pan-ethnic solidarity that leads away from monolithic nations toward manifold connections instead, making another diasporic reading possible.

Ahn is present in *Excerpts* through the reproduction of his calligraphic artwork for which he was once famous, in the Hanja characters that are the same as traditional Chinese. His presence is also signified through two portraits of him and close up images of his hands, where one finger is clearly amputated; through an excerpt from some sort of history pamphlet left uncredited by Lew; and through the excerpted lines from *Dictée* where Yu Guan Soon calls the names of Jeanne d'Arc and Ahn together. Ahn's missing finger is a corporeal reminder of the pact he made with fellow independence fighters, each cutting off the top halves of their own left ring fingers in a vow to fight to their deaths. His calligraphy is signed with a handprint of his left hand, the stump of his missing finger making it instantly recognizable. "She calls the name Jeanne d'Arc three times./ She calls the name Ahn Joong Kun five times" appears on an otherwise blank page between two reproductions of his calligraphy and two pictures of his hands, and then is repeated again on a new page in bigger font (42-47). On October 26, 1909, Ahn fulfilled the vow symbolized by his severed finger by assassinating former Prime Minister of

Japan and first Resident General of Korea, Ito Hirobumi. He was immediately arrested and sentenced by a Japanese court, and executed on March 26, 1910.

The actions and events to which Lew alludes seem on the surface to be unambiguously nationalist, enacted with a violence that is the antithesis of Yu Guan Soon's civil disobedience. But delving deeper into Ahn's political philosophy reveals a much more complicated view of how nations should relate to one another. Much of his calligraphy was produced while he was in prison, as was a work called "Treatise on Peace in East Asia" that reveals Ahn's commitment to a vision of pan-Asianism. He believed that a union of the three major powers in East Asia—Japan, China, and Korea—would lead not only to peace in the region but also ultimately to reduced global conflict, as their unity would make them powerful enough to resist incursions by Western powers who would then stop attempting to wage war with them. Although the treatise was left unfinished by his death, he left behind a complete table of contents outlining his full argument. Combined with answers from the hearing records of his interrogations, we can piece together further points in his recommendations for ensuring peace in East Asia: the formation of a United Asian Bank with a common currency, shared armed forces made up of men from each country in which each member would "learn two languages to improve their language skills and foster a sense of brotherhood," and the addition of Thailand, India, and other Asian countries to the bloc once it had been established (Yi 15-16). Because Ahn wrote in Korean, which I cannot read, much of my information about the "Treatise" comes from secondary sources. According to Yi Tae-jin, a Korean historian at Seoul National University, Ahn cites the first Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War as evidence that peace cannot be achieved in the region unless Japan gives up its colonial ambitions and recognizes other Asian countries as equals (13). Ahn believed that while countries like Russia, America, and Britain may occasionally enter brief

alliances with Asian countries for political gain, their loyalties fall along racial lines in the end and therefore pan-Asianism is needed to resist them (Yoo 247). Ahn fought for Korean independence from Japanese colonialism, but not for the reason of staunch nationalistic patriotism. Rather, he thought it was necessary for all Asian countries' self-interests to unite as equals instead of cannibalizing each other in the face of advancing Western imperialism. In fact, Ahn justified his assassination of Ito on this very basis: "Ahn summed up by stating that Ito Hirobumi was accused of disrupting the peace in East Asia" (Yi 15). The assassination was not simply an act of nationalism but more importantly a symbolic removal of a barrier to pan-Asianism. The 1905 Taft-Katsura Agreement, only discovered fourteen years after Ahn's death, shows how prescient Ahn's concerns were. This memorandum showed the United States Secretary of War William Taft and the Japanese Prime Minister Katsura Taro discussing their countries' mutual support of each others' colonizing designs on the Philippines and Korea respectively. America's support of Japan was specifically contingent on and closely related to its interest in breaking up the rest of Asia's autonomous power.

All of these background details go to show that a purely Korean nationalist understanding of Ahn Jung-geun in *Excerpts* is not enough, because it does not allow room for visions of community beyond the singular nation. Diasporic reading therefore keeps us attuned to the ways in which territorial claims do not have to be the main basis of community, but also to how the definition of 'Asian diaspora' is complicated by a long history of internal regional movement, animosities, and alliances. *Excerpts* reminds us that 'Asian' is a label used for the people within Asia, and also used by people in other places to categorize the ethnicities originating from Asia. Conceiving of an Asian diaspora is paradoxically both a uniting move and one that foregrounds diversity. It unites in the context of banding together to combat other oppressive powers, such as

imperial military forces in the case of Ahn's pan-Asianism or dominant white culture in the case of the 1970s Asian American movement. But it also serves as a reminder that Asianness is not monolithic, as those who come together in a diasporic community must contend with the aspects of their cultures, ethnicities, and histories that differentiate them.

I have already mentioned several times in my analysis of *Excerpts* that whenever Korean documents use Hanja as the written form, I am able to read them with my knowledge of traditional Chinese. This feature of language is another example of how Asianness as a concept is replete with things that signal its own complexity. Lew's use of this complexity in *Excerpts* is another thing that reveals more significance when we apply a diasporic reading. The spread of Buddhism from China to Korea in classical times entrenched Chinese as the written text in Korea. Until the invention of Hangul, the Korean alphabet, in the fifteenth century, Chinese characters known as Hanja were the means of written expression in Korean. Even after the introduction of Hangul, Hanja continued to be used well into the twentieth century and even today in certain contexts. Spoken Korean also bears the legacy of many loan words from Chinese.¹⁷ Although the imposition of a Chinese writing system was quite literally ancient history, the desire for a language of one's own that drove the development of Hangul still has resonances today. Language wars continue to wage in sites like Hong Kong, where protests frequently erupt over the PRC's erosion of Cantonese from school curriculums and public entertainment in favour of Mandarin.¹⁸ And of course *Dictée* is full of images of the Korean

¹⁷ For more information, see Steven Roger Fischer's *A History of Writing*.

¹⁸ There are a plethora of examples, from something as seemingly trivial as fears over the changed translation of Pikachu's name in the 2016 Hong Kong release of the Pokémon Sun and Moon video games to reflect Mandarin rather than Cantonese pronunciation, to the massive student protests over the suspension of two Hong Kong Baptist University students who refused to take Mandarin language proficiency tests in January 2018.

language under siege, from Cha's mother in Manchuria being forced to speak and teach Japanese to Cha herself being rigorously tested in English and French in her migrations away from Korea.

One way in which Lew alludes to this capacity of language to be a palimpsest of past and present power relations is through the use of page numbers in *Excerpts*. Because page numbers appear on every page except the ones intentionally left blank, the reader is constantly confronted with them and therefore constantly reminded of them. I suggest that the page numbers are part of the thematic content of *Excerpts* rather than paratext, which once again shows Lew's attention to the book as physical object with, as Brian Kim Stefans terms it, "expressive qualities" beyond descriptive language (*Before* 62). Korean uses two numeral systems, Sino-Korean and native Korean. The numbers at the bottom of every non-blank page in *Excerpts* are written in Hanja, the Chinese system, but they do not follow the counting conventions of Sino-Korean or Chinese numerals. Rather, they are written with Chinese/Hanja words but ordered as though they are Western numerals—which are of course more accurately Arabic numerals. For example, the number eleven in the Sino system is written as "十一," or "ten one," but in the corner of page eleven is expressed as "一 一," or two ones next to each other as in 11 in the Arabic system. The whole book's pagination goes on like this: 104, a one next to a zero next to a four in the Arabic system, is written as "一 〇 四" (a one next to a circle we are to understand as zero next to a four), rather than "一百零四" (one hundred zero four) as would be normal in Chinese numerals. The anomalous nature of this numbering practice would not likely be noticed by anyone who does not have some understanding of both Hanja/written Chinese as well as the Arabic numerals now considered the international standard. While these numbers evoke intricate webs of cultural

domination in various points of history, they also show how polycultural subjects can choose to play within these webs. Similar to Jam Ismail's treatment of language in "from the *Diction Air*," the ludic nature of these hybrid numbers tell a story beyond fighting oppression with nationalism. They allow for the imagination of a diasporic subject who is of multiple nations, or between nations, or uninterested in nations—a diasporic subject who can gather the fragments they've collected to build something different.

The alliance proposed by Ahn in his "Treatise on Peace in East Asia" is comprised of three core countries that make up what academic historians term the East Asian cultural sphere, or Sinosphere. These are countries that share a cultural past based on customs spread from what is now China, such as Confucian philosophy, Buddhist religion, political and legal structures, and a common writing system. These similarities and shared features are yet another example of community beyond state borders, but of course Ahn's vision reached beyond the Sinosphere, and so does a pan-Asian diaspora. I am a multi-lingual Asian diasporic subject myself—I was born in Cantonese-speaking and traditional Chinese-writing Hong Kong, raised in an English-speaking city and taught French in a bilingual Canada. *Excerpts* uses all three of the written languages I know, but I am not only drawn to the moments of linguistic crossover that I recognize. Lew also uses the Hangul form of written Korean, Greek, German, and Czech, in ways that, before the proliferation of the Internet, would have defied easy translation. Even with online translation tools easily at my disposal, sometimes the photocopied characters are blurred and hard to make out, and the Czech is handwritten in Lew's own occasionally hard to decipher scrawl. Again, the physicality of this book has been carefully considered to serve a purpose. Rather than being frustrated by the lacunae of semantic meaning in the foreign texts I could not manage to translate, I feel that *Excerpts'* use of languages contributes not only to the theme of the

limitations and power dynamics of language, but also to the subjective experience of each reader being an interlocutor with a unique and individual relationship to languages.

Asian Canadian poet Fred Wah considers the use of code switching to be an essential tool in the diasporic writer's toolbox, as it helps to enact what he calls a "synchronous foreignicity," or an "ability to remain within an ambivalence without succumbing to the pull of any single culture" ("Half-Bred Poetics" 83). Code switching in Wah's case is defined as a movement between two or more languages, usually the insertion of a 'foreign' language into the master one. Aesthetically, this can help the poet achieve subtler or more complex wordplay, but Wah is also interested in the political impact of this aesthetic. Although he does not explicitly state that part of the value of code switching is in how it includes or excludes certain readers, he is very against using other languages as decoration to add 'ethnic flavour' to writing—he goes so far as to call providing a glossary for the code switched words an "apology to the master" (84). He also quotes from an essay by Mary Louise Pratt that does address the power of code switching as a form of excluding those who are usually in a dominant linguistic position: "In the context of the fiercely monolingual dominant culture of the United States," code switching "lays claim to a form of subaltern cultural power: I own both your language and mine, the minority speaker says; both are mine to combine and recombine as I choose" (Pratt 863). The inability to understand one or more of the languages being used is just as important to the poet's project as the ability to understand, because letting some people in while keeping others out is a key effect of the code switching technique. The slipping between different languages in *Excerpts* may or may not be considered code switching depending on how strictly one defines it, since the switching occurs through collaging texts of different languages together rather than through writing in one main language and inserting words and phrases from others. However, there is still strong attention paid to the

theme of 'master' languages and the languages treated as subaltern (as in the original *Dictée* as well). Therefore, the politics of code switching still applies, most importantly in the sense of not being able to understand or translate some parts. That sensation of being excluded is essential while reading *Excerpts*. It foregrounds the feeling of interacting with Lew's very subjective experience of the texts he is collaging, while also having a subjective experience of your own that is specific to your relationship to all of the languages within.

In his reading of *Excerpts*, Rob Wilson criticizes Lew's "poetic ego" in creating this book, "as he narcissistically plunders the grave, body, sacred sites, hidden sources, and ruins of Theresa Cha's powerful project for signs of his own literary election to speaking and extending her beauty, her power, her gift as a possessed Korean poet" (281). Wilson cautions readers not to forget the gender dynamics of a male editor coming in after a female creates words, saying that "Emily Dickinson's fragmentary textual corpus as reconstituted by Higginson-like male editors for their own projects ... should give us egotistical pause" (281). It is an astute and crucial observation, but not one that Lew does not already point out himself in *Excerpts*. After the section with excerpts from the children's book about Yu Guan Soon, Lew inserts excerpts from four different texts about the Eleusinian mysteries, continuing the theme of mother/daughter sacrifice begun in *Dictée*. But immediately after that he includes references to another Greek myth not featured in *Dictée*: the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Through an excerpt from Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, "You interrupt m/e, you sing with strident voice your certainty of triumph over m/y death, you do not heed m/y sobs, you drag m/e to the surface of the earth where th" (qtd in Lew 81), Lew links the story of love-stricken Orpheus who played his lyre to bring Eurydice back from the afterlife to his own project in *Excerpts*, where he loves *Dictée* so much that he cannot let Cha rest in her grave and tries again and again to resurrect her.

Cha's real life murder blurs with Eurydice's fictional death, when Lew writes, "did not die:/ was/ robbed of her death" (91). Lew recognizes that in a way he is imposing his will onto the late Cha to fulfill his own desires, in a parallel to Orpheus enacting his male desire over Eurydice's fate. And yet Lew's work is so compellingly done that it also convinces us of its own necessity: of course *Dictée* is a text that demands this level of investment from the reader, of course anything less than attempting to crawl inside its body and bring it back to life would not be enough to truly engage with the depths of its complexity. A diasporic reading of *Excerpts*, and understanding *Excerpts* as a diasporic reading of *Dictée*, allows us to see why this subjective interaction with text is more than narcissism. It allows us to see Lew's work not as a singular definitive voice, or a simple linear relationship between two writers and two texts, but as part of a diverse network of possible connections. Each reader, through their relationships to the languages, techniques, source texts, and ethnic histories used and theorized in *Excerpts*, enters this network and is invited to interact as well.

Conclusion: You Are the Subject, You Are the Object

Not only does *Excerpts* encourage us all to be something of an Orpheus when reading *Dictée*, it also asks us to bring that level of personal investment and co-creation to *Excerpts* itself. A strategic mix of giving and withholding little details encourages the reader to fall into vortices of external research similar to those Lew must have gone through when he chased down the threads of references and free associations he saw in *Dictée*. For example, two photocopied reproductions of Ahn Jung-geun's calligraphic works are first presented without context or prior mention of Ahn's in *Excerpts*. Two pages later, after the quotation from *Dictée* calling Ahn's name, comes a close-up image of just Ahn's hands, emphasizing the missing ring finger. The next

page zooms out to show the whole portrait of Ahn, triggering a process of flashbacks in the reader's mind: the hands come from this portrait, and the four-fingered handprint on the calligraphy comes from these hands. More details of Ahn's revolutionary deeds are given after these images in *Excerpts*, but it was through the process of researching what those works of calligraphy meant that I found they were produced while Ahn was imprisoned. From there, I found the other works he also produced in prison, including the "Treatise on Peace in East Asia" that became vital to my own personal construction of a framework in which to understand *Excerpts* and *Dictée* through diasporic reading.

In his review of *Excerpts*, Brian Kim Stefans argues that despite being such an homage to *Dictée* that it not only copies its techniques but also its very words, *Excerpts* is no mere derivative work: "the two books can therefore be seen as conversant twins or mirrors of each other, communicating over the long decade since Cha's death" (*Before* 65). This invitation to communicate across space and time that he sees in Cha's work is perhaps one more stylistic aspect we can add to the list of commonalities in Asian experimental writing that Stefans catalogues in "Remote Parsee." Although he does not explicitly say it in that essay, his recurrent use of the word "constellation" and his exploration of how Asian writers group together but not through the usual channels of schools of poetry suggest that these writers call to each other, as Cha called to Lew and Lew called to me. These networks of reading once again recall Spahr's interpretation of Cha's move away from a "uni-directional" form.

The desire to create a multi-directional community of interactive readers and co-writers can be seen in Cha's other poetic works beyond *Dictée*. The poems in the "audience distant relative" section of Cha's *Exilée/Temps Morts* are heavily invested in the theme of poetic utterances as correspondence reaching over distance and time. Indeed, one is even entitled "letter

sendereceiver," and ends with the lines "you, the receiver, seeing the sender's image/ speak over the/ voice" (21). Rather than an act of violence, speaking over someone's voice becomes a necessary part of reception, as the message is taken into the receiver's physical body. The blurring of the borders between the roles of author and reader is further explored in "object/subject," which in full reads:

in our relationship

i am the object/you are the subject

in our relationship

you are the object/i am the subject

in our relationship

you are the subject/i am the object

in our relationship

i am the subject/you are the object (23)

The repetition in the structure and the subtle, easily missed changes in word order complete the blurring effect. In addition, the intimacy of "I" and "you" makes it impossible to ignore that the relationship under consideration is being enacted right now, in the moment of reading the poem, and in every moment of somebody reading the poem. Finally, Cha's poem "messenger" reiterates that this reciprocal relationship of sending and receiving happens across both space and time,

because the messenger "is the voice-presence/ occupying the space" and "occupying the/ time between" (25).

The works analyzed in this chapter engage with and develop concepts of diasporic community that allow us to move beyond binary oppositions. In contrast to more established nationalist or postcolonial reading frameworks, I argue that these works are most productively read when we come to see that, much like in a diaspora, we do not have to take up one stable position with simple linear relationships to other positions. Rather, we can be in multiple subjectivities (and objectivities) at different times, and relate to others in a network. As we move from this chapter to the next, we will see that many of the diasporic themes that these poets experimented with in text and multi-media print form also become significant in electronic and Internet forms. Interactivity, eroding the distinction between subject and object, moving away from a physical definition of shared space into a more abstract conception, and a multiplicity of connective networks are just some of the more obvious themes that are important to experimental works in both Asian diasporic and digital poetry.

Chapter Three. Early Adopters: Asian Diasporic Experimentations with the Early Internet

In the year 1984, networked computers were only just beginning to become popular and were still not yet widely available for personal use. It was then that two poet-academics in Canada decided to start an online literary magazine—the world's first. What were the motivations and desires behind it, how is it related to Asian diasporic poetry, and what does that reveal about it? The focus of this third chapter will be on "early adopters," poets of the Asian diaspora who pioneered digitally influenced works in the early days of the Internet. These works include Fred Wah's contributions as a writer, co-founding editor, and programmer for *SwiftCurrent*, known as "the world's first on-line literary magazine" (Keep et al.). Installed on a VAX 11/750 instruction set computer at York University in 1984, running on Unix-based software created that very summer by Laura Creighton of Softquad Ltd, the magazine is an important representation of early desires for the decentralization of literary authority that could be enabled by computing networks. It also shows the flaws and gaps that keep digital technology from being a completely utopian solution to enduring political problems in poetics. Other works studied in this chapter will include the new media poetry of Brian Kim Stefans, in particular the Flash-animated "The Dreamlife of Letters" and the collaborative project *Circulars*, both hosted on his website *arras.net*, which he began in 1998. In addition, this chapter will look at the works of Tan Lin, an Asian American poet who is, in Stefans' opinion, one of the first people to harness the torrent of "found language" online in his first collection, *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe (Before 7)*. Lin provides a thought-provoking alternative viewpoint to my implicit focus on the political aspects of reading digital poetics through diasporic theory. His interest in creating an ambient poetics of soothingness, particularly in his work *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking*, asks my project to contend with whether writing about oppression or

racialization are requirements for inclusion into Asian diasporic literature, whether his works can be read as political, and why one would want to read politics into his work. The previous chapter argued for diasporic reading as a technique that allows us to get away from absolute binaries like political vs. apolitical, and this application of diasporic reading will be further explored in this chapter.

As a whole, this chapter interrogates the dominant tendency to read these early adopters as influencing only digital poetics—even Stefans' compendium of his own interviews and reviews, *Before Starting Over*, separates "Asian American Poetry" and "Digital Poetics" into different book sections. The poetic reputations of each of the three focal poets in this chapter have at some point been bifurcated: people talk about their work as if there is a distinct and distinguishable split between their digital experimentations and their racial concerns. I argue against that bifurcation by showing that for Wah, Stefans, and Lin, the racial and political significance of being of the Asian diaspora is *a part of* their experimental projects. A common reaction to their pioneering digital works is the neglect or sometimes even refusal to take them as being fundamentally connected to the writers' other 'ethnic' work. Rather than bifurcating, I argue that we should see the experimental and the ethnic as linked projects. The underlying interests in collaborative networks, subverting of language rules, challenging the authority of who gets to dictate the distribution of reading materials, and fragmentations of the self within the technological experimentations in this chapter are also all goals deeply connected to the writers' racialized subjectivities. Therefore, I believe we should read these works of digital literature as Asian diasporic literature as well, and examine what doing so illuminates about the common concerns and differing interests of early adopters. This chapter will also explore why writers of Asian diasporic descent would turn to new media technologies, and in return what an Asian

diasporic reading framework can bring to understanding electronic experimental works.

Though I make arguments throughout for their importance, the questions of this chapter have not yet been previously studied in extensive depth. The closest I could find, at the time of writing, is a dissertation chapter by Nathan Allen Jung that also analyzes the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Fred Wah in the context of diaspora and media. Rather than going back to 1984 in Wah's work, however, Jung compares *Dictée* to Wah's 2008 collection *Sentenced to Light*. He argues that both are representative of "a diasporic avant-garde that disrupts" a consumer model of literature that hierarchizes "active producers and passive receivers" (26). His use of a more recent work by Wah to argue that Wah "employ[s] avant-garde aesthetics to explore diasporic migration through print objects that stretch the boundaries of the book medium" (26) demonstrates that Wah's interest in crossing genres and media is ongoing. Whereas Jung stays within the realms of print, however, I argue that it is the multi-media interests and explorations of early adopters that are particularly well suited to expressing the collaborative, non-linear, non-hierarchical aspects of diaspora as reading writing technique. Wah's earlier works, as well as those of Stefans and Lin, use collaboration and multi-media forms to negate the idea of one singular, fixed origin, just as diaspora itself is about community and multiple contingent origins.

The advent of computer-related and computer-assisted literature does not mean an entirely new mode of poetry. Rather, these early adopters extend practices that already existed, using new technology to enact ideas or intentions that were previously constrained. Charles Olson's influential "Projective Verse," for example, lays out his idea of "composition by field," in which poetic energy is captured by "the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings" as opposed traditional forms. This manifesto can be read as an account of how new

technological advancements facilitate poetic experimentation: Olson suggests that "it is the advantage of the typewriter that ... it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends." The new technology of the typewriter means that the poet can, "without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work" (22). In another example, Craig Dworkin claims that twentieth century Modernist poetry perhaps pre-dated the media that best accommodate them, as they "are proleptic: their striking forms anticipate the computerized new media that would seem to be their ideal vehicle" (30). But attempts to create various kinds of interactivity now opened up in new ways by digital technology can be traced back much further than that. Eileen Herbert-Goodall argues that "the nonlinear, linked, and associative properties inherent to electronic media have always potentially existed within the realm of print" (13), and Lynette Hunter even suggests that the marginalia (and the marginal conversations as more readers add to the commentary) in hand-copied medieval manuscripts represent an early example of interactivity done by "readers who felt that they were part of a community that legitimated physical interaction with the page [...] The text, although written, was flexible" (70). Hunter extrapolates this malleability of the written text through the years to *SwiftCurrent*, where "the writer is not sacrosanct—not that they had not previously realised this, but the experience of the medium sharpens its intensity" (77). The human desires, behaviours, and inspirations in the works analyzed in this chapter are not so much new as they are facilitated in new and exciting ways by new technology, which also drastically—though not completely—opens up the field of accessibility.

Fred Wah and *SwiftCurrent*

Early adoption often means that there are few established conventions for a creator to build upon, rely on, or subvert, and few assurances that audiences would know references to them. As in the case of the founders of *SwiftCurrent*, and in Brian Kim Stefans' words on the issue of "the conventions of visual literacy on the Internet" ("Interview" 318), these early adopters were on the one hand borrowing conventions from other related fields and on the other hand acutely aware that they were developing new ones for others following in their footsteps. In the back blurb of his 2003 *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics*, Stefans writes, "What is a 'digital poetics' and where can I get one?" It is clear what he thinks digital poetics is *not*: "I don't like to think of anything on the web as 'archiving,' but as some form of activism [...] My sense is that what we do on the web has to have some sort of dynamism to it [...] rather than simply to 'make something more available'" (*Before* 262). From Stefans' standpoint, a project like *SwiftCurrent* lacks the dynamism that he advocates for, in the sense that its focus is on the Web as a distribution and communication system, without really focusing on it as a tool to change the actual content of a poetry or literary magazine. Fred Wah and Frank Davey's explicit attempts to foster collaboration, to fundamentally impact the avenues of publication and distribution and to inspire others to democratize the literary scene show, however, that *SwiftCurrent* had aspirations beyond simply making an online database of poems and essays. .

Wah and Davey began *SwiftCurrent* in the fall of 1984, and it continued operations until 1989, with a brief resurrection in 1990. During this period, as he was working on this electronic experiment with Davey, Wah was also extremely prolific in his own poetic and critical work. The vast majority of existing scholarship on Fred Wah's poetic and theoretical work focuses on his influence on formal innovation and racial politics in Canadian literature. Very little of it

considers Fred Wah as a digital innovator. However, I argue that the experiments he pioneered in the field of new media were motivated by the same interests behind his explicitly Asian diasporic work: to question the structures of authority, to subvert the favour of dominant culture, to find alternative ways for those at the margins to give voice. In this section, I first look at Wah's creative work in *Waiting for Saskatchewan* and his critical writings on poetics to establish the context of his thinking around the time of *SwiftCurrent*'s inception. I also make a case for seeing *SwiftCurrent* as an extension of Wah's stated desires to resist dominant white culture, not only through his writing but also through the editorial and publishing processes. His *SwiftCurrent* co-founder, Frank Davey, characterizes Wah's involvement with *TISH* and *SwiftCurrent* as separate from his work as an ethnic poet, but I argue that they are part of a larger diasporic aesthetic, as his experimentations with publication and distribution share the ideals of subverting established power dynamics that he explores in his more obviously 'ethnic' work.

Wah's collection *Waiting for Saskatchewan* was published in 1985, and won that year's Governor General's Award for poetry, a prestigious national prize in Canada. *Waiting for Saskatchewan* explores the recurring theme of fatherhood, both Wah's father and Wah's identity as a father, and meditates on the Chinese heritage that Wah inherited from his father's side. He wrestles with the question of whether ethnic identity is biologically inherited or instilled through culture, and returns often to the idea that the answer is not singular—"now I see it's clear cut/ both genetic 'bag' as well as choice" (6). Being "clear cut" is not the same as being simple, however. The fact that it is both genetic and chosen causes confusions and anxieties for people, in identifying themselves and in trying to categorize others. Wah's mixed heritage and his living situations in small Canadian towns with immigrants from many different cultures amplify these difficulties. He also explicitly reflects on being part of an Asian diaspora in a section of mixed

prose and verse called "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail," a sort of travel diary of a trip to Hong Kong and China after his father's death, and seeing visions of his father everywhere. He writes, "In Cantonese language territory I feel more comfortable," followed by a stream-of-consciousness transition to the music playing in the airport waiting lounge: "is that Chopin with the waxed evening light people me looking so hard for something to connect with sounds or faces an image out of all my images story unknown building blocks from then to now tangent to hearing a rhythm without having to pay attention to the melody?" (38). What seems like a tangential observation about background music applies to his experience of the Cantonese language, which is a sense of comfort in the tones and rhythms heard in his childhood without fully understanding all of the specific words being said. These were the ideas about ethnicity and diaspora that he was working through while he was setting up *Swiftcurrent*.

In this same period of time, Wah also presented two papers called "Making Strange Poetics" and "Making Stranger Poetics" that he would eventually combine into the essay "Strang(l)ed Poetics," collected in *Faking It*. "Strang(l)ed Poetics" grapples with defining a poetics of estrangement, which he "had come to understand as the generative function of the kind of poetry [he is] interested in and the kind of poetry that might effect social reconstruction," and in the essay he attempts to tease out a "negotiation between a poetics of process and a more current critique of language as social form" (3). In 1991, shortly after the end of *SwiftCurrent*, he also published "A Poetics of Ethnicity." As already addressed in detail in the previous chapter, "A Poetics of Ethnicity" lays out the reasons that minority and other marginalized writers should purposefully write against colonized and inherited forms. In her survey of Wah's poetry up to 1990, Pamela Banting claims that "Wah has never written out of the subject position that we might call, variously, the traditional lyric, humanist, Cartesian, or unitary self," which Wah

strongly associates with the types of mainstream poetry he writes against; instead, "[h]is proprioceptive writing makes a radical incision in the logocentric 'interior' to allow present locality to 'contaminate' its protected body" (84).¹⁹ Read alongside Wah and Davey's vision for *SwiftCurrent*, which I will analyze shortly, we can see *SwiftCurrent* as an extension of Wah's political poetics of ethnicity. Through his experiments with alternative publication platforms, Wah expands his strategies of resistance against dominant culture beyond writing and into the production process of texts.

Wah also published *Breathin' My Name With a Sigh* in 1981, immediately before *SwiftCurrent* began. Thematically, it shares many of Wah's ongoing interests in geography, both Canadian and Chinese, in the idea of biotexts, in the music within language, and in the name 'Wah' inherited from his father. Formally, it includes verse, prose, sections of erasure poetry, sound poetry blatantly influenced by bpNichol, and experimentation with different kinds of typography. Even more interestingly, however, the standard print version published by Talonbooks in July 1981 is known as the third draft of *Breathin'*. Before this version, other drafts of *Breathin'* had been printed by Coach House Press (now renamed Coach House Books) through an experimental project called Manuscript Editions, which used simple computer printouts to print participating works in progress to order. Peter Quartermain describes the

¹⁹ Banting's use of "proprioceptive" is a reference to Charles Olson's theories in *Proprioception*, which critic Charlene Diehl-Jones identifies as a set of ideas that "has perhaps exerted the most tangible influence on Wah's own writing" (7). In Olson, proprioception is how "the 'body' of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experience of, 'depth' Viz SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES" (17). Experience is not something external that happens upon the body; rather it is produced by a body receptive both its interior and exterior. For Wah, in order to write and to experience, "we must be ready to *receive*. Writing becomes a charting of the proprioceptive moment" (Diehl-Jones 7).

ordering process in *Stubborn Poetries*, noting that a manuscript edition came dated and numbered by draft but that it was unclear "if it is possible to order an earlier draft of a subsequently published book," and "without access to an authenticated 'original' computer printout it would be difficult if not impossible to determine the exact status and even provenance of the text so produced," thus subverting the traditional notion of a published book altogether (259). The computing technology Coach House used for these Manuscript Editions was developed through their connection with the University of Toronto's computing science program, which was one of the first departments in the world to use the Unix operating system. According to Susan Brown's study on the influence of digital editing technology in the history of Canadian literature, the use of Unix allowed Coach House to "experiment with onscreen editing, text formatting, and printing, specifically a set of tools called Troff (typesetter runoff) that programmer David Slocombe began to extend significantly. This led to the founding of a spinoff software company, based in Toronto, called SoftQuad" (83). These technological advances came out of a shared interest in challenging both traditional publishing structures and the very conceptualization of a strict progression from creativity to end product. *SwiftCurrent* would eventually end up running on Unix-based software developed by this same company, SoftQuad.

The final piece of relevant history that is important to understanding the context of *SwiftCurrent* is the development of Fred Wah's relationship with magazine co-founder Frank Davey. The two met as undergraduates at the University of British Columbia and, along with other student poets, started *TISH* together in 1961. *TISH* was a poetry newsletter based on the poetics of writers associated with Black Mountain College, such as Charles Olson and especially Robert Creeley, who taught at UBC as a visiting lecturer in that time. In retrospect, *TISH* is seen as very influential and "has come to signify very potently in the history of Canadian literary

movements" (Diehl-Jones 5), because it ushered in a turn toward politicized avant-garde verse.²⁰ Even early in their poetry careers, Wah and Davey shared an interest in pushing the bounds of poetry, and in poetry as something active and changing and to be done, rather than a staid thing to be read. In an interview with Irene Niechoda and Tim Hunter, Davey talks about starting *TISH* with his friends because they felt marginalized and disadvantaged at UBC because of their backgrounds compared to the majority of others in the larger literary scene:

I think we felt marginalized in a number of ways, having come from a small town, and being disadvantaged vis-à-vis, in our view, the students who had been educated in the city. Marginalized in terms of being young; marginalized also in terms of the educational or the academic or intellectual interests of the faculty at UBC. We definitely felt as if our own interests somehow were met, with the exception of Warren [Tallman], unsympathetically. ... Marginalized by being Canadian in North America; marginalized by being west coast and British Columbian, in the Canadian context; marginalized by being interested in writing, and becoming more and more interested in language rather than content, which was the dominant aesthetic, it seemed to us, in the magazines that were most visible in Canada. And that sense of being marginalized, and the anger that that aroused in us, was I think a very important source of the abrasive energy ... that you see throughout *Tish*. (92-93)

Later on, writing his memoirs through his own history of *TISH*, Davey says that by early the 2000s he felt that "Wah is trying to distance himself from *Tish* and strengthen his credentials as a Chinese-Canadian poet—although in terms of actual genetic heritage he would have twice as

²⁰ George Fetherling, *The Georgia Straight*, called *TISH* "probably the most influential literary magazine ever produced in Canada, of greater significance than even *Preview* or *First Statement*, the two that brought poetic modernism to the country in the 1940s." Online reference: http://www.abcbookworld.com/view_author.php?id=59

much call to construct himself as a Swedish-Canadian" (120). In fact, Wah does also write about his Swedish grandparents and there is indeed a Swedish Canadian literary tradition that proudly claims him, but it is more important to note that Davey sees the projects he did with Wah as separate from Wah's 'newer reinvention' of himself as a Chinese Canadian poet. Davey's personal feelings aside, I argue that it would make much more sense to read *TISH* and *SwiftCurrent* as contiguous with Wah's self-fashioning of his artistic identity. Davey's explanation of the marginalizations that motivated the founding of *TISH* applies equally well to Fred Wah's sense of geographical and cultural subjectivity. It is no accident that *SwiftCurrent* shares a name with Wah's hometown of Swift Current, Saskatchewan, and in his most famous work *Diamond Grill* Wah writes about the intimate connections between home, racial background, and small towns of the Canadian West. From the context of why he became involved in *TISH* to what he was working on while also starting *SwiftCurrent*, the experimental goals of decentralization, democratization, collaboration, and ongoing works have always been related to Wah's poetics and politics as an Asian diasporic writer in Canada.

Decentralization, democratization, collaboration, and work that does not end with closure: these values largely summarize the main aims and concerns of the *SwiftCurrent* project, and the magazine attempted and achieved them to varying levels of success. In her investigation of electronic advancements in the literary marketplace, which is one of the very few extant book studies to take an in-depth look at *SwiftCurrent*, Lynette Hunter points out that "the entrenchment" of the book as an object that passes from publisher to seller to reader "makes possible copyright, contracts and censorship; it also makes possible the profession of authorship and defines the kind of person likely to produce work of literary value. Electronic media challenge this model in many essential aspects" (65). Davey and Wah recognized this potential

of electronic media early. According to Davey, "*SwiftCurrent* was conceived as a low-maintenance in electronic magazine, [where] the manager's duties would be restricted to responding to an electronic mail, verifying that the writers who sought to use the system were indeed 'writers,' and maintaining and circulating user manuals" (8 *Anthology*). The readers of the magazine curate their own experience with the ability to keep what they want to see and delete what they do not. The desire for a "low-maintenance" role for editors and managers in which hierarchy is not exerted runs in tension with the desire to only accept submissions from established writers. Contributor status is given only to "any Canadian writer who has published a literary book," although these writers are allowed "to contribute work by both themselves and by others" (113). Davey and Wah acknowledge that "this choice has clear and somewhat contradictory political implications—on the one hand it maintains literary authority by privileging those who have already been able to publish, and by privileging literary writing, and on the other it decentralizes literary authority by transferring editorial tasks traditionally performed by editors and reviewers over to the reader" (113). Although they acknowledge it, however, they do not seem to be invested in trying to resolve this tension. Rather, this contradiction is accepted as a necessary part of their experimental project.

Furthermore, *SwiftCurrent* was designed to encourage interactivity. Besides the interaction between the readers and *SwiftCurrent* as they individualize their own magazines, Davey and Wah also anticipated collaborations between multiple writers and provided a "collaborations" directory along with instructions for how to use it. In addition, *SwiftCurrent* was also intended to function as a kind of online writers' workshop, because it allowed authors to post works in progress "and to receive feedback in a way that print simply did not permit" (Keep 1090). Drafts could be posted, allowing readers to not only comment on them but to also see the

writer respond to and incorporate criticisms in the next drafts. This enabled a literary community of about forty to sixty regular subscribers to "talk" to each other about writing without being physically located in the same place (Hunter 76). Facilitating the creation and maintenance of communities not based on shared physical location is a recurring theme we will see again in other Asian diasporic early adopters, and also later in the next chapter about more contemporary online developments.

Besides de-hierarchizing, interaction, and collaboration, Davey and Wah were also explicitly invested in using *SwiftCurrent* to disrupt the traditional modes of distribution and to look ahead to the potential opening of the field offered by cyberspace. In his paper presentation to the American Library Association in 1986, Davey writes that "a project like *SwiftCurrent* represents a fundamental alteration to the ways in which literary texts have been distributed in our culture" (112). He specifically associates words like "authority structure," "permission," "acceptable," and "judgement" with print publication and says that "*SwiftCurrent* short-circuits this process ... and passes the text directly from writer to reader" (112-13). His language here is reminiscent of similar ideas about actively subversive readers in Roland Barthes' famous "The Death of the Author," or Michel de Certeau's "Reading as Poaching," both written just a few short years before Davey's presentation on *SwiftCurrent*. *SwiftCurrent* was therefore tapping into contemporaneous philosophies on the democratization of text, but using new media technology to explore and expand them. "What *SwiftCurrent* distributes," Davey summarizes, "is not a physical object but an intellectual construction" (113). Not only does electronic technology change the hierarchy of the passive flow of information from authoritative writers policed by publishers and sellers to readers, it also changes who has access to the literary marketplace as producers. According to Davey, those involved in running *SwiftCurrent* were keenly aware that

editorial control "is a political question"; they suspected that "[t]hose who fear that electronic publishing will change how texts are selected for distribution, or how they are distributed, are usually those who benefit from the current system" while "[t]hose less worried about this tend to be those who feel excluded from the system—regional minorities, racial minorities, and of course women" (114). It is debatable how much these exclusionary effects really changed the once the existing power structure adapted to electronic publishing, but it is important to note that there were political motivations behind the creation of *SwiftCurrent*.

Although they were unable to anticipate how electronic publishing would change over time, the goal of *SwiftCurrent* was never to do so. Rather, as an unprecedented exploratory vessel dipping into the waters of the early Internet, it was "an experiment designed as much to identify and raise [...] questions as to answer them" (118). Despite the many limitations it had, which I will further analyze below, Davey and Wah remained invested in the idea of decentralization, in "represent[ing] as many interests within society as possible" (118), and in experimenting with ways to achieve those things. For example, the first Unix-based version of the magazine ceased operating in 1989, but a new website called "Swift Current 2" was briefly resurrected from 1990-91 (Keep 1091). The second version "attempted to be more responsive to the need for community building, and to the potential of the interchange for the supportive development of new work and new writers" by no longer requiring contributors to be established writers (Hunter 77). By Lynette Hunter's estimation in 2001, "electronic publication has the potential for the first really radical shift in reader-writer relationships since the periodical and the introduction of mixed media printed products, and is possibly more revolutionary than any shift since the introduction of print in the fifteenth century" (78). Similar to Davey and Wah, she sees the political implications of how "the Web makes it possible for people to make public writing that

print publishers would never touch" (80). But again, the project of *SwiftCurrent* was more than just changing publishing or revolutionizing reading—even at this early stage of the Internet, Davey and Wah could see the features of connectivity that would eventually become our social media landscape today. "One attraction of the electronic magazine," Davey explains in *The SwiftCurrent Anthology*, "is its immediacy. Another is the magazine's geographical and aesthetic breadth" (9). Davey and Wah appreciated that online technology was a confluence of multiple possibilities that could allow for the simultaneous enactment of ideas that have long interested poets and other writers, especially those with minority, experimental, anti-authoritarian, and/or non-mainstream interests.

Before I examine the limitations of *SwiftCurrent* in further depth, I feel it is worthwhile to look at the actual content published in *SwiftCurrent*, which few other academic studies have done but which helps illuminate both what *SwiftCurrent* strove towards and where it fell short. To this end, I use *The SwiftCurrent Anthology* as a somewhat representative example of what was published in the online magazine, although it is obviously not exhaustive. The entry on "Technology, Communications, and Canadian Literature" in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* describes *The SwiftCurrent Anthology* as "a sampling from the tape archives of its original incarnation," which serves as "an interesting snapshot of Canadian literature in the period" but "the works that it collects do not, in and of themselves, indicate the radical nature of their genesis" (1091). Looking at the twenty-seven entries collected in the anthology, I largely agree with this assessment. They skew heavily toward poetry, with twenty-one verse poems and another one that could be considered a prose poem. The rest are three pieces of short fiction, a set of diary entries and notes detailing Eli Mandel's attendance at a literary theory conference, and Frank Davey's presentation to the American Library Association. An entry by bpNichol

experiments with how the words can be presented on the page, as one might expect from the renowned pioneer of concrete, sound, and visual poetry. In general, however, the rest of the poems and stories are similar to what one would see in any print journal, in that they do not engage with the physical aspects of the 'page' that electronic publishing puts within the creator's direct control, such as margins, fonts, spacing, orientation, etc. Nor do any of the works in the collection showcase any of the collaborations or authors' responses to readers' critiques of drafts that were happening behind the scenes of the online magazine.

Perhaps the only obvious thing to set the anthology apart from traditional print is the breadth and diversity of content when taken all together: there are concrete poetry, lyric verse, science fiction/fantasy, critical theory, and journal entries—an intended aspect of *SwiftCurrent* and what Davey calls "the catholicity of the magazine" (8). Again, I want to point out how the drawing in of writings from the margins, creating a network of multiple connections rather than a linear relationship between major and minor, resulting in a non-definitional collaboration is very much in line with Wah's diasporic vision of a poetics of ethnicity for the "nonmainstream, visible/invisible minority, marginalized" (54). However, it is hard to dispute that *SwiftCurrent* "was less important for what it produced than for what it was, not so much the first online literary magazine, but as Davey indicates in his concern for the amount of private email traffic that the system generated, the first online literary community" (Keep 1091). Even that experimental community itself, driven by a certain radical vision for the potentials of digital technology, was limited in several ways.

For all that there is certainly a catholicity of theme and genre, the fact that the majority of works by far fall into the category of poetry does point to limitations in how *SwiftCurrent* was spread through social networking. Since Davey and Wah began by inviting those who might be

interested in the magazine, and since both Davey and Wah are poets who mostly know other poets, the audience and contributors skewed more heavily towards the poetically inclined from the start. In addition, the user base of *SwiftCurrent* was also geographically skewed towards the two major Canadian cities where the founders had the most ties: Vancouver, where their poetic careers were centred, and Toronto, the home of the VAX-11/750 machine on which the magazine was installed. In *SwiftCurrent*'s later years, more writers throughout the rest of Ontario and the Prairie provinces joined, but very few from Quebec or the Maritimes did. Rather than thinking through how one's real-world literary community necessarily impacts the initial spread of one's online literary community, however, Wah and Davey attribute this discrepancy to the fact that more metropolitan writers are more willing to adopt computer technology even though the dial-in modem used by *SwiftCurrent*, provided by DataPac, charged the same cost for service throughout the country ("Introduction" 7). International data services, such as Tymnet, that could connect with Datapac also allowed collaborators from other countries to join in, but that was even rarer than Canadian users outside of Vancouver and Toronto. Wah and Davey also identify issues in technology adoption even after people were already subscribed: "The problems of *SwiftCurrent* users have been almost entirely problems in their learning to use either *SwiftCurrent* software or their own communications software" (8). They claim that while these issues may at first "be intimidating to the novice computer user," "most writers seem to be so interested in communicating with other writers they persevere through the initial problems in order to avail of themselves of the directness and speed of the magazine's mail utility" (9).

Therefore, we can identify a few main limitations to *SwiftCurrent*'s foray into using electronic technology to subvert established hierarchies and facilitate community creation. Like a lot of online media after its time, *SwiftCurrent*'s initial spread depended on word of mouth

through pre-existing channels—a notion we are now familiar with by the names of 'viral marketing' or 'going viral.' It is one of the many examples of *SwiftCurrent* being a forerunner in its field, but in a way it can run counter to the project of de-hierarchizing, since things tend to be most successful in this mode when they can most take advantage of systems already thriving. "Personal subscriptions to SwiftCurrent have been from the beginning concentrated in the Toronto region" ("Introduction" 7), despite the fact that combatting Toronto-centrism was a motivating factor for Davey and Wah since the days of *TISH*. In addition, there is also a high price of admission that acts as a gatekeeping mechanism, limiting *SwiftCurrent's* project of democratization. First, there was the rule that only established 'serious' writers could contribute, which we have already covered. Second, there was the institutional elitism of being associated with a university, which was a necessity to make access to a minicomputer in 1984 feasible. Furthermore, users must also have a certain level of education and confidence with technology in order to access the magazine. This computer literacy was relatively rare in the 80s, even on the niche scale of the relatively small experimental poetry community in Canada. Although familiarity with personal computing has become common today, both in Canada and around the world, we must remain fully aware that this issue continues to be a barrier to access, and we must keep this in mind in all instances of talking about the Internet as a tool for building community or for bringing something to the masses, as there are necessarily still people being excluded.

In the summer of 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a resolution to condemn governments that intentionally disrupt Internet access to their citizens, thereby symbolically affirming that we have entered an era in which the Internet is recognized as an integral part of many people's everyday lives. However, the Pew Research Center reports that as of February 2016, Internet access but remains much higher in advanced economies despite

growing worldwide.²¹ The number of adults who use the Internet at least occasionally or who own a smartphone are at over 90% in countries such as South Korea, Australia, and Canada, and at over 80% in the US, UK, Spain, Israel, and Germany. Meanwhile, these rates fall significantly in poorer countries, mostly located in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, with only 22% in India and below 20% in Burkina Faso, Pakistan, Uganda, and Ethiopia (Poushter). *The Globe and Mail* reports that Internet usage in Canada is highest in the world by time spent online, according to data from a Web research firm called comScore. The average Canadian spends 43.5 hours a month online, which is nearly double the worldwide average of 23.1 hours. An employee at comScore says that although he cannot speculate as to why Canadians are so engaged with the Web, he does know that it is a trend that has long been established: "Since 10 years ago, since the boom of the Internet, we've always been at the top of online engagement" (El Akkad). While this trend might correlate in some way with why the first online literary magazine in the world was established by and for Canadians, it is also a useful reminder to think about how the Asian diaspora around the world may be unevenly represented in online literature depending on the location of the diasporic community.

Other considerations to keep in mind when thinking of limitations to access include age, race, and language. Pew Research Center data from 2015 show that the proportion of American adults aged 18-29 who use the Internet is at 96-97%, and has always outpaced the Internet adoption levels of all other age groups. It was not until 2012 that more than half of adults aged 65 and over reported using the Internet. However, while older adults still have the lowest levels of Internet usage today, seniors have the greatest accelerating rate of change since 2000 (Duggan

²¹ The statistics used in this chapter are organized by seemingly firm and distinct categories of race, nation, and ethnicity. The content of my dissertation challenges the impermeability of these categories, but for the purposes of staying on topic I do not delve into the issue with these statistics.

and Perrin). When broken down by race and ethnicity, this same set of data show that "English-speaking Asian-Americans have shown consistently higher rates of internet usage compared to whites, blacks, and Hispanics." 72% of English-speaking Asian-Americans self-reported as Internet users in 2000, while "whites and Hispanics would not cross this threshold until 2006, and blacks would reach this level in 2011" (Duggan and Perrin). By 2015, the number of English-speaking Asian-Americans using the Internet had reached 97%. This high rate of adoption would seem to confirm techno-orientalist stereotypes of Asianness' inherent link to digital technology. Because the Pew survey was only conducted in English and Spanish, however, the report notes that "Those who speak other Asian languages but are not comfortable speaking English are less likely to respond to these phone surveys." I draw special attention to this note because scholars of Asian American activism have remarked that a significant number of Asian immigrants tend to experience language assimilation barriers—an oft-ignored disruption of the model minority myth, as is the fact that socio-economic success varies widely among national and ethnic groups within the non-homogenous category of 'Asian American.'²² Keeping all this in mind, although these statistics are specific to Internet usage in America, the larger point they illustrate is that all online projects limit audience access to some degree merely through being online. The fact that groups of people were kept out of *SwiftCurrent*, whether because of barriers to access or simply because they were not appealed to or even aware of it,

²² For example, Julie Sze points out that "almost half of the Asian Pacific Islander population has lived in the United States for 20 years or less" (149), and C.N. Le's "Socioeconomic Statistics and Demographics" shows that statistics about high rates of college graduation and median family income in Indian, East Asian, and Filipino Americans in comparison to other racial groups, including the white majority, are only a part of the story, as the same statistics show that there is an extremely wide range of variation among other Asian ethnic groups. Although Asian Americans form a community based on common experiences, one of those very experiences is being seen as all the same.

does not necessarily invalidate how Davey and Wah set out to resist and alter the structures of production, distribution, consumption, and participation traditionally established in Canadian literature. Rather, it can be understood as areas to focus on for further experimentation with technology and strategies.

Fred Wah's involvement in this magazine does, to an extent, make *SwiftCurrent* a work of Asian Canadian literature, insofar as Wah is arguably the most influential and renowned Asian Canadian poet and *SwiftCurrent* is one of his projects. Few academic works as of yet have analyzed him as both an Asian diasporic writer and an electronic literature innovator and I think I have made a good case so far for the two aspects being connected. Wah's involvement also brought in poets from his constellation, as Brian Kim Stefans might say, which included Asian Canadian poets such as Gerry Shikatani and Jim Wong-Chu. In 2012, Hong Kong-based poet and experimental digital artist David Johnston, who goes by the artist name Jhave, filmed a brief video of Wah for the *Observatoire de l'imaginaire contemporain*. In his description of the video, Jhave writes, "SwiftCurrent the online magazine anticipated the widespread emergence of publishing-on-demand and crowd-sourced content-creation for niche communities by a couple decades." His reference to "niche communities" echoes those, including Davey and Wah, who have pointed out that electronic publishing creates new markets for those who might otherwise be rejected by publishers for not being viable in the conventional literary marketplace. It also harkens back to Wah's "poetics of ethnicity," and his reasons for not only associating non-mainstream writing with marginalized communities but also actively encouraging such communities to produce such writing as a gesture against domination. Again, the aims and ideals behind *SwiftCurrent* fit perfectly well within Wah's larger sense of diasporic Asian poetics.

SwiftCurrent brought together a group of artists and critics with similar interests in experimenting with new technology, but aside from the social and collaborative bonds formed between these writers, *SwiftCurrent* also had subsequent, lasting influence. For example, it inspired early *SwiftCurrent* subscriber Trevor Owen, then an English teacher at a Toronto inner city high school, to create an online literary community for his own students because he felt that "the idea of creating communities of shared interest in writing through the use of communications technologies seemed worth pursuing" (Owen 131-2). Although the users in the small online network he created were just the same students who were also in his classes, he noticed that their "written exchanges demonstrated that something different was happening online," and he "began to see that their online interactions were quite like the very best of class discussions, only richer, deeper, and more reflective than most of our period-bound classes could sustain" (132). He also observed that different students who normally would not speak up in class were more talkative online, and that the simultaneous conversations they had with each other were not necessarily the things they would say in class or to him. One can see Owen's projects as a pedagogical application of *SwiftCurrent* pioneering experiments in using electronic technology to subvert conventionally linear power dynamics and open up spaces for more voices. In 1988, Owen went on to found the Writers in Electronic Residence (WiER) project at Simon Fraser University, connecting professional writers to student writers for online mentorship.²³ In its later years, WiER also hosted online writing conferences, and it only ceased operations in 2013 due to funding cutbacks.

Besides inspiring other online writers' workshops, *SwiftCurrent*'s close relationship with Coach House also influenced further exploration of the Internet as an alternative means of

²³ Their website, though no longer updated, can still be seen at <http://www.wier.ca>

distributing literature. Coach House Books was founded in 1996 after the demise of Coach House Press, and since its formation has been publishing both print and digital versions of new works and titles from CHP's back catalogue using SoftQuad's innovative technology. CHB was one of the first publishing companies in the world to practice something we now commonly see on many websites offering free content: "In order to remunerate offers for the online texts, CHB uses a 'tip' system; if they enjoy what they see, readers are encouraged to use a web-based credit card service to leave writers a fixed gratuity" (Keep 1093). Of course, electronic publication today has advanced to a point where individuals can self-publish, no longer necessitating "in-house editing, distribution, and marketing; nor is it necessary for contemporary published authors to have their work stocked and sold in retail bookstores," to such an extent that "avenues of electronic publishing [are] becoming a source of stiff competition for traditional publishers. Furthermore, the power relationship between authors and publishers has been greatly altered" (Herbert-Goodall 18). From their positions at the forefront of this wave, before others joined in, *SwiftCurrent* and even Coach House were both anticipating and unable to truly guess at how electronic publishing would expand and change into what it is today.

After being the managing editor of *SwiftCurrent* and co-editing *The SwiftCurrent Anthology* with Davey, Wah continues to maintain an interest in electronic literature. From 1996 onwards, he served as an Electronic Writing Advisor for the Kootenay School of Art's Electronic Mentorship Programme. He also lends full support to the Fred Wah Digital Archive, an ongoing digital repository and bibliography run as a student-led academic project at Simon Fraser University. In 2012, Wah states in *The Tyee's* profile on his then-new appointment as poet laureate that he is "struck at how active poetry is, and not just in Canada," ascribing at least part

of that vibrancy to "digital access" and how "poetry, because of its natural bent to play with language, moves in that environment in a very dynamic way."

The background, motivations, ideals, limitations, and effects of the world's first online literary magazine are a valuable object of study, not only because few so far have given it the sustained attention it deserves, but also because it illustrates what early concerns and desires were for experimental writers and editors of Asian descent on the Internet. It may be tempting to see Wah's early experimentations with *TISH* and *SwiftCurrent* as somehow removed from his 'ethnic work,' as his co-editor Frank Davey does. However, not only do I disagree with this attempt to impose this dialectical opposition onto Wah's work, I do not think such a distinction can actually be made. In a 1996 interview Wah conducted with Leung Ping-kwan, republished in *Faking It*, Leung explains that there was not a big Hong Kong poetry scene when he was a young poet in the 60s and 70s, since all Chinese literature was oriented toward mainland China and all English poetry was oriented toward the British Romantic and Victorian traditions. He had to go out of his way to find American avant-garde poetry, things from other sub-cultures that felt marginalized, that resonated with his own culture of marginality. In response, Wah says, "I experienced a very parallel situation. In Vancouver, in the early sixties, we also felt we were ignored by the centre, Toronto. Our magazine, *Tish*, in fact, started partly because [of this]" and concludes that "we've had very similar experiences" (154-155). In this conversation, Wah links his motivation for starting *TISH* to his larger sense of ethnopoetics. This linking happens in the context of a bigger link between these two poets who got in touch because of a shared Asian diasporic connection, talking about their non-mainstream work and how they see themselves as working at the margins. They make explicit connections between each other, between their motivations, and their works. Contrary to Davey's claims that Wah distanced himself from his

experimental roots to seem 'more Chinese,' I argue that *SwiftCurrent* is in fact part of a continuous exploration of minority subjectivities. It can be read as a project by an Asian diasporic early adopter, and doing so allows us to make crucial connections to other work.

SwiftCurrent also serves as a good introduction to the other projects that will be examined in this chapter and the next, all of which come after *SwiftCurrent*. We can see which priorities and limitations in experimental electronic work remain the same, which evolve, and which new ones entirely unanticipated by Wah or Davey arise. As I have already noted in my analysis of the content in the *SwiftCurrent Anthology*, the works in *SwiftCurrent* did not really utilize electronic tools to experiment with formal approaches, for all that everybody was interested in general experimentation. They mostly experimented with the development, delivery, archiving of the works rather than the content within the works. This next step in the level of engagement with a new medium is what we will be addressing in the subsequent investigation of the groundbreaking work of Brian Kim Stefans.

Brian Kim Stefans and "The Dreamlife of Letters" as Part of a Larger Oeuvre

As noted earlier, Brian Kim Stefans is an Asian American poet known for both his work in critical theory and in a wide variety of poetic experiments, with an interest in figuring out the process behind the establishment of conventions for digital poetry. Stefans' Flash poem "The Dreamlife of Letters" (2000) is an early attempt at trying to use and create digital poetry conventions, and to use the Web for more than just a means of distribution. He began curating a website devoted to new media poetics called *arras.net* in 1998, a mere few years after the release of the world's first popular web browsers Mosaic and Netscape Navigator in 1993 and 1994 respectively. *Arras.net* is still running and showcases both his own work as well as others' that

reflect his current interests, which range from book reviews to digital art, critical theory, videos, music, and poetic experiments. "Dreamlife" is hosted there with the caption "My best known work, a long-form (variably 11 to 14 minute) animated poem in Flash," while on the *Electronic Literature Collection: Volume One* website it is captioned, also by Stefans, as "A Flash animation, based on a text by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, that attempts to explore the ground between classic concrete poetry, avant-garde feminist practice, and "ambient" poetics (that's really just plain fun to watch)." I argue that "Dreamlife" should be more closely examined for reasons that have thus far not been reflected in the existing scholarship about it: for its similarities with the motivations behind *SwiftCurrent*, and for the similarities between how Stefans' and Wah's work become bifurcated into separate 'ethnic' and 'experimental' concerns; for what political work "Dreamlife" actually does; for the reading contexts of "Dreamlife" that should be understood as part of its artistic project; and for the role of collaboration as a concept in "Dreamlife." Towards the end of this section, I will also touch on another project by Stefans called *Circulars*, to show how the themes of my argument are relevant to more than just one of his works.

"Dreamlife" consists of animated white and black text on an orange background, and does not require any further actions from the user besides pressing "run poem" after the introduction blurb. The rest of the poem continues with no further way to control the speed or direction of the animation, so the reader very much sits back and views the poem as it unfolds. The introduction explains that the genesis of "Dreamlife" came from a 1999 roundtable on sexuality and literature, in which writers were asked to respond to a brief essay by Dodie Bellamy. Stefans' position on the panel was to respond to another panellist's response to, in this case feminist theorist Rachel Blau DuPlessis. He claims, in this text at the beginning of the

"Dreamlife" experience, that he "wanted to respond to her text in a detailed manner, but I felt that normal prose would not suffice on [his] party," and so he alphabetized the words in DuPlessis' text and created concrete poems from those redirected words as his contribution to the panel. After the panel, however, he realized that Flash animation could do more for those poems than their static arrangement, which he felt was not very interesting because the technique had already been thoroughly explored by so many others for the past fifty years. "Dreamlife" is a typography-based video with no music and no interactivity, and the animation is different for every word or set of words, which appear in alphabetical order and sometimes appear repeatedly to represent how often the words were used in the source text. Multiple critics have commented that it looks rather like movie title sequences, including Stefans himself, recalling Asian experimental poets' affinity for film and visual culture as discussed in my previous chapter. Many of the movements and/or arrangements in "Dreamlife" make certain words stand out more, makes some words feel related to each other, imparts an ironic humour to some words, and so on. Although perhaps this video sounds like it has little to do with *SwiftCurrent* besides also being an example of an early use of electronic technology by a poet of Asian descent, some of the motivations and desires behind both are surprisingly similar.

In the log of an online chat with Darren Wershler-Henry, published in *Fashionable Noise*, Stefans states that he was driven to writing "Dreamlife" by the "opacity" of the DuPlessis text to which he was supposed to respond (18). He felt that DuPlessis' wordiness left him little room to reply because "it wasn't discursive, but a classic 'word salad.'" The process of creating "Dreamlife" was meant to slow down her text, "isolating a few key terms, creating some different juxtapositions [...] something of a v-effekt on her text" (18). By "v-effekt," Stefans means *verfremdungseffekt*, a term used specifically by Brecht to mean the estrangement or

distancing effect that defamiliarizes an audience from being immersed in the narrative of the text and forcing them to consciously and intellectually respond instead. He specifically states that the unproductive difficulty of the original text and the desire to turn that difficulty into something a reader could actually engage with is "why [he] ran the computer processes on it" (18). Using computer technology to gain access into a text, to further engage with something that otherwise obstructs conversation, is essentially also the idea behind *SwiftCurrent*. Both projects also try to use technology to level the playing field in some way against traditional gatekeeping mechanisms, in "Dreamlife"'s case overly dense academic language.

Although it was created before personal access to the Internet was as ubiquitous as it now is—or perhaps because it was, and therefore has had so much time to gain viewers and a reputation—"Dreamlife" became Stefans' best-known poem. He states that he began putting poetry on the Web because he "wanted to add a certain sensibility to [digital poetry] that was more sophisticated than what [he] was seeing [at the time]. That's what *The Dreamlife of Letters* came out of" (308). Because so many people ended up knowing Stefans just for "Dreamlife," his reputation "kind of split" between being an Asian American poet who experimented in many various poetic forms and being someone thought of primarily as a digital artist (308). Like my disagreement with Davey's splitting of Wah's poetic selves into 'more experimental' vs. 'more Chinese,' I argue that it is both unfeasible and undesirable to split Stefans' work in this way. Some critics would seem to agree, by recognizing the magnitude of "Dreamlife" in Stefans' oeuvre while still noting that it is part of a larger body of work and poetic identity. Timothy Yu, for example, in his retrospective of Asian American poetry in the 2000s, says of Stefans that he "has emerged as a major creator and critic, a pioneer in the use of Flash animation in online poetic texts" in "the burgeoning field of digital and electronic poetry," and that "Dreamlife" "has

been highly influential" (845). At the same time, Yu is also situating Stefans in the context of Asian American poetry, which is important for a writer like Stefans because his work, by its nature of being scattered across the Internet, has a tendency to be isolated out of context. Stefans himself owns that much of his work, taken by itself, may be easily labeled as work that "doesn't have any kind of ethnic interest or doesn't have any kind of sociopolitical interest" ("Interview" 311) even if he, as a complex individual with many political interests, can see how his own work is interrelated. We will come back to this idea of what 'political interest' even means in the context of electronic poetry later in this chapter, but for now it is enough to note that words like "activism," "social," and "political" are words that Stefans often returns to in talking about experimental poetry even when applied to works that are not apparently socio-politically active.

Craig Dworkin, also writing on the influence of "Dreamlife," draws our attention to its allusions to conventions from "cinema and filmstrip animation," and also points out that "the work displays an overall typographic design palette referencing the mid-century aesthetic of concrete poetry" (53). Dworkin astutely notes that both of these references to media and styles from the twentieth century serve to highlight the idea of cutting-edge technology itself, and how it passes from innovative to obsolete over time. Obsolescence and concrete poetry are two more considerations that give further context for understanding the conventions Stefans was playing with in the creation of "Dreamlife." I want to suggest that thinking more deeply about these contexts allows us to see the political project of "Dreamlife," that it uses its relationships to technological obsolescence and poetic conventions to make commentary about themes such as language subjectivity and capitalist modes of production. These themes, similar to some of the concerns that motivated the creation of *SwiftCurrent*, demonstrate why it is objectionable to label Stefans' digital work as not having "ethnic" or "sociopolitical interest."

First, obsolescence. In her study of how the instability of electronic devices affect authorial and readerly choices, Alexandra Saemmer posits that digital artists have four options for dealing with instability: "aesthetics of surface," "mimetic aesthetics," "aesthetics of the ephemeral," and "aesthetics of re-enchantment." She categorizes "Dreamlife" as an example of the use of the aesthetics of surface, which she defines as when "the artist simply ignores this instability and creates at once, as if the digital framework was immutable" (478). More specifically, works that use the aesthetics of surface do not problematize the actual programming of the work as part of its reading, and the author's project is "seriously challenged by the instability of the device" (479) because every new update of a computer or a program would change the intended result of the work. Saemmer says that the main way to account for such instabilities and inconsistencies would be to provide the source files, which Stefans does not do. Seeing the source file would allow viewers to see if a lag between animated words is programmed into the work, even if that lag inevitably becomes less and less perceptible as the animation runs faster on newer and/or more powerful processors. Because the animation in "Dreamlife" is not purely decorative but can be read to convey meaning, the consequences of not knowing whether something is an intended programming effect or an unintended machine effect are more serious, as "the reader is given no opportunity to grasp the meaning the author wants to convey" (482). Saemmer concludes that Stefans "should have chosen a video device for this poem in order to preserve the surface events from the fatal 'overflows' of the device" or "indicated the exact electronic framework ... to keep his work in conditions approaching those experienced during the creative process" (482). However, I propose an alternative reading: that the variations resulting from the instability of the medium are in fact part of the experiential

effect of "Dreamlife," as a meta commentary on incongruity and on the subjective reception of all language acts.

Rather than only using the aesthetics of surface, I would argue that "Dreamlife" also employs what Saemmer calls the aesthetics of the ephemeral—"the ephemeral and uncontrollable nature of [the] work" is considered part of "its fundamental aesthetic principle" (479). Some examples that she gives of ephemeral aesthetic techniques include "letting the work slowly decompose, as well as in accepting changing forms and updates and in taking up the possibility of incidents and unexpected events" (479). In multiple interviews and in his writings collected in *Fashionable Noise*, Brian Kim Stefans clearly demonstrates an awareness of how his computer works obsolesce over time, mentioning pieces that he updates to keep them working as their interfaces change and pieces whose demise is impending. He also explains the thought process behind his source files' relationships to the digital pieces we see, saying, for example, that he may spend as much or even more time "working on the source files as ... on the poem itself, understanding them to have a symbiotic relationship to each other that corrupts normal cultural valuations of what 'code' is and what 'language' is" (64). Dworkin's reading of "Dreamlife" corroborates the interpretation that "Dreamlife" intentionally plays with its own obsolescence. He considers the work's visual references to mid-century design to be something that "gestures away from both the very future it defines and the moment its imminent obsolescence will soon mark" (53). This self-referential gesture relies on conventions of the past while commenting on the present and future of the technology it uses, and can also be read as a broader commentary on the trendiness of not only technology but also language—in the poetic form, in the academic discourse of its source material, and in which words are more commonly used than others, which may also date the work over time.

The influence of concrete poetry is another context that informs how "Dreamlife" can be read. Darren Wershler-Henry, himself an experimental poet and also senior editor at Coach House Books from 1997-2002, points out that "Dreamlife realizes a potential that classical concrete suggests but never achieved, i.e. animation (except through analog means, like flipbooks ...) but they're nothing like the kind of smooth animation that's now possible on the Internet" (*Fashionable Noise* 20). This statement brings us again to the notion that the Internet is not necessarily a revolutionary medium that gives birth heretofore unseen forms of poetry, but is rather a technology that allows for the evolution of existing ideas in experimental poetry—such as mixed media, sound, or interactive—into a new, more advanced phase. As I claimed earlier in the introduction to this chapter, it is a similar process by which Charles Olson came to see typewriters as a technology that allows for the kind of play with spacing that writers had wanted to do previously but could easily achieve until then; digital technology is the new typewriter, allowing for even further play with space, and even more definitions of shared "space."

Counter-intuitively, Wershler-Henry also suggests that some concrete and experimental poets have a "luddite" aversion to electronic poetry. He is critical of that attitude "because the website is the first truly new mode of poetic composition that's come down the pipe in a long time. The alternative is to abandon the medium to the advertising people. Poets need to be literate in all the forms of composition that their culture affords them" (*Fashionable* 22-3). Here, he reiterates the idea of the website as an instrument used for poetic composition just like the typewriter, and he also suggests that there is an artistic and perhaps even anti-capitalist imperative to engage with electronic media in the creation of poetry. Thus, when Stefans explicitly draws a connection between concrete poetry and "Dreamlife," as he does in his explanation that he first wrote out his Du Plessis response as concrete poems before deciding to

animate them, he is not merely harkening to a lineage or set of reading conventions but also advancing the need for avant-garde poetics to stay current with the contexts of their production.

In the conclusion of his book on the history of the international concrete poetry movement, Jamie Hilder looks to "Dreamlife" as a next step past the development of concrete poetry. Stefans writes in the introduction screen of "Dreamlife" that he was dissatisfied with the initial static poems he had created in response to Du Plessis because "it was in a sort of antique 'concrete' mode" and "resembled a much older aesthetic, one well explored by Gomringer, the De Campos brothers and numerous others in the past fifty years, and so it wasn't very interesting to me." That is to say, Stefans was initially and automatically attracted to what concrete poetry could do for the text, but the fact that it is a set form already thoroughly established by others made him seek something more innovative and of the moment. What concrete poetry can do for texts, Hilder argues, is an understanding that we are seeing "designed words for a designed world"—concrete poems are not "rooted to a page or site ... but neither do they float. They have histories and functions. They have weight. They mean within a larger critical network, and the process of positioning them within a field of understanding has political implications" (236). "Dreamlife" is both the posing of and an attempt to answer the question of how to capture that same effect of concrete poems, but using a new mode, creating a new aesthetic, exploring something that has not yet been done and therefore become interesting again. This process of newness, or renewal, is necessary because the design of our world has changed drastically in the digital age. The electronic medium of "Dreamlife," in Herbert-Goodall's words, "not only contains but also performs textual meaning" (11). Hilder points out that "[t]he conditions required to view Stefan's eleven- to fourteen-minute Flash-video-poem are recent, but no less significant than those which the development of reinforced concrete produced for the modernist

project" (240). However, he also states that "[t]he dominant initial critical experience [he] feel[s] when 'reading' these contemporary texts is that, despite their familiarity, [he] lack[s] the lexicon to engage them." More specifically, for "The Dreamlife of Letters," Hilder feels that he would need to "learn more about Flash animation, and the way language has developed and is still developing on the internet," and "take into account the internet's demographic," "as well as the policies, both political and economic, that define what we commonly understand as an unmappable" in order to adequately engage with the work (241).

Although he is fantastically astute and accurate in his assertion for the necessity of a networked understanding of "designed words," Hilder may be somewhat forgetting that he is part of the designed world they respond to. He is subjected to Flash on websites and advertisement popups; he has been exposed, even if unconsciously, to the way language and animation is developing on the Internet; he is a percentage of the Internet's demographic. My work in this chapter endeavours to provide at least some of these contexts for understanding a few early electronic texts. More importantly, my work in this chapter aims to show examples of Asian diasporic writers who have put deep thought into these contexts themselves, from the conception to the execution of their Internet experiments. They are not merely throwing works into cyberspace for the sake of a high-tech gimmick; they have thought about what they want to achieve with the technology available to them based on the parameters of the tools' capabilities, their user bases, their established and unestablished conventions.

My contexts, at the time of re-reading "Dreamlife" for this chapter of my dissertation, are as follows. I am in the year 2017, and "Dreamlife" has existed for seventeen years. I am a doctoral student of English literature, born in Hong Kong and raised in Canada and living in America. I have had home Internet for the last fifteen years, and I would guess I currently spend

at least one or two hours every single day on social media. I have been more or less seriously studying poetry for the last nine years, and here are some things that jump out at me about "Dreamlife." It is composed of white and black animated text on an orange background. Each word appears as often as it is repeated in the Du Plessis source text. The words are mostly alphabetized, except rare occasions where attached punctuation causes them to fall out of order. It begins with a prologue before properly beginning with the letter A. The prologue prominently features the word "gender" in a kind of rotating pinwheel pattern, and it ends with the word/symbol grouping of "(you®" in large white font centred the middle of the screen, which I am continually tempted to call the page. The "you" makes me feel interpellated, which the registered trademark symbol reinforces, emphasizing as it does the concept of a legal or corporate entity. However, the registered trademark symbol also makes me chuckle, since it feels very tongue-in-cheek. Its irreverence is accentuated by its animation—the symbol drops down from the top and bounces a few times before settling in its position as a superscript over the word "you." The entire duration of "Dreamlife" proper runs without controls, so that the reader or viewer cannot pause or unwind, causing me to pay closer attention than I likely would otherwise. At the end, one arrives at a screen that gives you the option to re-view specific sections of the poem, grouped into thirty-five alphabetized chunks.

After the prologue, the word "Cixous" is the first to catch my particular attention, perhaps because of my contexts and my knowledge of her as a literary theorist. It immediately hints at "Dreamlife"'s provenance as a response to a feminist text, even if one had not read Stefans' introduction included before the animation begins. The next word to jump out at me is "Caucasians," again perhaps conspicuous to me because of my contexts and my purpose of re-reading this text for an academic project about ethnic writing. "Gender" as a word is impossible

to ignore for its sheer number of appearances—first in the prologue, and then again in its alphabetical turn, as a long line of repeating words sliding horizontally across the screen just slow enough to be read but slightly too quickly to be counted. "Me" has a similar repetition moving in a line from the bottom to the top, but a blur effect has been applied to the font so that it is genuinely hard to tell how many "me"s are meant to be represented. "Sexuality," too, is numerous, more so than "gender" or "me," but there is also blurred echo effect applied to it so that the exact number is obscured by after-images moving in sequence. Overall, the words that seem to catch my attention the most do so because of a combination of what they signify and how they are animated.

Saemmer suggests distinguishing between "animation effects" and "animation figures" to make sense of how the animations augments our understanding of language in "Dreamlife." Animation effects are those that do not add new meaning to the text being animated. Something flashing to draw attention to itself, for example, is an animation effect because the flashing "makes sense regardless of the media content it is applied to" (481). Animation figures, however, depend on and change the context. They "are characterized by an incongruous, surprising or confusing relationship between an element set in motion and the involved media content" (481). An example she gives is flashing text that says 'I am being discreet.' If animation figure is defined specifically as "the gap between a reader's expectation and a realized state, and if the figure is used to surprise the reader," then ""many meaningful phenomena in digital writings fall into the category of the *effects*" (481). The abundance of the words "me," "gender," and "sexuality," for example, may be meaningful because of how the emphasize the themes of the source text, but the animation that highlights their abundance is merely an effect, one that would signify numerousness no matter which word it was applied to. Other animations in "Dreamlife"

perform the meaning of the word itself, such as "drip" falling down the screen in a dripping motion or "height" being vertically stretched out until the letters are very tall. Although those precise animations cannot necessarily be applied to all other words, the idea of acting out the word as an animation effect is fairly literal and straightforward, and could be done to many other words.

The animation that happens between the words "modify" and "mollify" are arguably a figure rather than an effect. The word "modify" appears, and then the D in its middle drops down and morphs into two Ls, leaving "mo_ify" in its wake and falling neatly into the slot of another "mo_ify" below it, turning it into the word "mollify." The reader is certainly surprised, especially when one further considers that the two words were plucked out of a text in which they did not necessarily appear together or have this relationship with each other. The animation implies a causal relationship, that we modify things in order to mollify people, which brings a new meaning to the two words that would not have materialized without the animation figure. "Caucasians," too, contains what I would classify as an animation figure. Several words that begin with B bounce off of a large white B that spans nearly the size of the entire screen, before the word "Caucasians" flies onto the screen and lands inside the white lines of the B, not bouncing off it but intruding into its body. It is the only word beginning with C that appears on that B screen, giving the sense that it is invading. Perhaps it can be read as a performance of colonizing power, and perhaps there is more reason for it to capture my notice than the fact that I went into the poem primed to see themes of racialization.

On the whole, the words and their animations come together to form an impression that the piece is about sexualized and gendered subjectivity, with playful elements but also some implication of a political statement, though inchoate. Even without knowing the process of how

Stefans created "Dreamlife" out of something writing by Du Plessis about Dodie Bellamy in the context of a literary roundtable, the words as they appear in "Dreamlife" give clues as to their provenance. However, the context is arguably part of the piece itself, and not only because an explanation of it is included as part of the introduction on the page immediately preceding the video. Brian M. Reed, in his work on avant-garde poetry in the twenty-first century, suggests that so many new works use programs, formulas, and mechanical forms because "the era of Web 2.0" is a time when

the contemporary corporate workplace insists on a high degree of productivity and flexibility, a willingness to collaborate, and the ability to adapt with alacrity to new situations and relationships. Racial, ethnic, and sexual diversity is both encouraged (why waste human capital by excluding anyone from the workforce?) and evacuated of significance (why let difference reduce efficiency?). (52)

The avant-garde response is to appropriate these practices and attitudes toward the redirected end of poetry. "Dreamlife" quite literally came out of a situation of academic labour that asked for collaboration and racial, ethnic, and sexual diversity, and Stefans' direct response was to mechanize the text he received through the rote processes of alphabetization and enumeration. Reed further identifies the idea of a "project poem" as common in the twenty-first century, making texts more accessible for both the academic/grant-funding market and the popular reader market. An experimental poem can be explained as being a project of retelling, erasing, rearranging, collaging, manipulating, re-creating, or otherwise responding to some source text(s). "The book-as-product-of-a-project," Reed writes, "provides a stable reference point for readers (especially reviewers and critics) as they wend their way through the broken conflicting storylines, multiple voices, diagrams, photographs, glossolalia, [etc.]" (65). The project provides

a framework for understanding, "granting order and significance to the strange texts" and therefore allowing poets to explore more radically without taking the full risk of incomprehension. Avant-garde poets may play against the convention of the important project by intentionally showing a lack of skill or technical brilliance, as in the case of Kenneth Goldsmith's transcription works. "Dreamlife" straddles the line between subverting and epitomizing. On one hand, Stefans is merely putting someone else's words in alphabetical order and repeating them—his description of the piece on the *Electronic Literature Collection: Volume One* site even sounds rather dismissive of attempts to take it seriously, saying it is "really just plain fun to watch." On the other hand, there is a technical adroitness that is impressive for its time and for a poet who is not a professional web designer, and the backstory of the project does give significance to "Dreamlife" as a commentary on language and technology beyond what the source text was about.

Although he describes "Dreamlife" as "ambient" and "just plain fun to watch," this is not Stefans' main or only approach to digital poetry. Like the creators of *SwiftCurrent* who found that the collaborative conversations and online community created around the magazine were just as important as the magazine itself, Stefans states that when he "first started doing work with computers and poetry, [his] initial inclination was to form a 'group' of some sort," as "text/computer interaction" seemed to him the most interesting object of research (*Fashionable* 19). Although it might seem to be an exploration of other facets of computers and poetry, traces of the idea of group interaction still linger in "Dreamlife." When asked if setting other people's text to Flash is a dialogic exercise, Stefans answers, "Yes, in a sense, except that I haven't run any of my 'translation' pieces by their authors prior to completing them, but it is a dialogue with the author through the text and, in this way, a critical or editing act, ... as I am revealing some

aspect of the text that might not have been seen otherwise" (20). Textual interactivity is still present, more in the sense of the interactivity of the works of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Walter K. Lew as discussed in the previous chapter than in the sense of Internet hyperlinks. Like those poets, Stefans is performing his own interaction with source material while at the same time producing something for readers to further interact with. Collaboration and group dynamics are, in Stefans' practice, always linked to a sense of politics as well. He acknowledges that "Dreamlife" is not necessarily "more 'political'" than the source, or than poetry by his contemporaries, but in its creation he was consciously thinking of a Brechtian vision he describes as "a 'positive' vision of political ideology" that aspires toward behaviours rather than a "negative" one that seeks to "de-socialize" (18-19).

Those who work with a literary approach, according to Stefans, are in a prime position to "‘trouble the sign’ in terms of creating political content on the web [...], in that we are already looking at the use of text on the web—which is almost always graphical and embedded in some sort of interface—as politicized" (28). Although "Dreamlife," as I have analyzed above, does engage in commentaries on language, technological context, gender, and possibly race that can be interpreted as political stances, Stefans' work on Circulars is a much more explicit example of how he sees politics and group collaboration as crucially linked in Web projects.

Stefans founded the website Circulars, set up at www.arras.net/circulars, on January 30, 2003. Its stated purpose was "to provide focal point for poets' and artists' activities and reflections on the impending invasion of Iraq along with the politics of the media and civil liberties issues. Its format is a multi-author weblog, or 'blog'" (*Before* 269). Similar to *SwiftCurrent*, participation in Circulars began by invitation. Stefans crafted and sent a mission statement to twelve poets whom he thought would be interested in contributing. Part of this

mission statement, now available on the about page of the website, says that it aims to have "some specific identity distinct from other art/politics website [sic] -- a sense that this site investigates a *form* as much as operates in the chain of activist sites." The form of a blog was chosen because of Stefans' belief that "in the world of the internet, the link can be as powerful as word of mouth, and is itself the prize of an effective rhetorical strategy." It also states that "CIRCULARS was not created in the spirit of believing that all poets should be "political" or even "social" in nature," although "such arguments are free to be made on the website"; rather, Circulars is a place for "articulating statements that are unique to the poetry community" in response to Bush-era global policy. His affirmation that not all poets need to be political or social is interesting, not least because politics and sociality are two of Stefans' main interests, recurring continuously in his creative and critical work as well as in his various statements about poetics (in interviews, presentations, Web posts, conversations, etc.). Perhaps single pieces by themselves may be apolitical and asocial, but taken as a whole it would be hard to argue that Circulars is not a political and social space, being a collaborative blog addressing the issue of war. Or perhaps Stefans is playing one of his subtle language tricks: not all poets should be obligated to be political or even social, but poetry always can be read politically and socially. Circulation is an inherently social activity.

The idea of taking Circulars as a whole is inbuilt to Stefans' visualization of this project. He puts together a manifesto of sorts in "Toward a Poetics for Circulars," collected in *Before Starting Over*. In it, he writes that "the site can be conceptualized as somewhere between a 'poem' and a 'community'" (275). In its cultural and historical context of the newly signed PATRIOT Act, Circulars was meant to "challeng[e] censorship and mak[e] dissent palpable" (279). As a kind of "poem of prose," Circulars as one entity "offered a dynamic collage of visual

and linguistic materials in a consistent but changeable structure. Even the most mundane inclusions ... contributed to this hypertext poem" (280). In this way, Stefans encourages us to see the whole of *Circulars* as one large poem, with many interactive extensions that can be navigated differently by different readers. Chapter four of this dissertation will read *Circulars* as a whole work much more closely, but I introduce *Circulars* here as another data point in the diversity of Stefans' works, and to show how the seemingly easily constructed dichotomy between "Dreamlife" and *Circulars* as 'apolitical' and 'political' works respectively is in fact not so clear cut.

Unlike "Dreamlife," which leaves more room for interpretation as a more abstract poem but is also directed by one linear progression through a video beyond the reader's control, *Circulars* is on one level a semantically straightforward prose work that explicitly states its arguments but is also a navigable collage that will be experienced differently by every reader. Such an approach may "appear to be appealing to the 'avant-garde' and no one else, but even the decidedly mundane prose-stylist Chomsky observed that there is a transcendental beauty in the most pedestrian language" (*Before* 280). Stefans complicates this idea of *Circulars* as one poem in an interview with Giselle Beiguelman by saying that *Circulars* was not intended as art, "at least in any strict sense (it's not a product or a performance), but I suspect that its strength is in its verbal and visual choreography, its skewed relationship to fact, and that it was produced by several authors, rather than any individual piece of content" (250). A multiplicity of voices, a goal that Davey and Wah strove for in their pioneering online magazine, continues to be a potent asset in the innovative electronic work that came two decades after it. In hindsight, Stefans feels (as Wah and Davey felt with *SwiftCurrent*) that *Circulars*' effectiveness was limited by the fact that it was mostly "read and contributed to by a clique of people related to the poetry community,

" although other random readers would occasionally participate in commenting, including "few right-wingers [who] did attempt to use the site as a stage for their own agendas" ("Toward" 283). The diversity of the main posts, too, were limited to mainly poets in the US, Canada, and the UK, with the rare occasional submissions from other countries such as Turkey, echoing the barriers to access that we identified with *SwiftCurrent*. Another feature it shares with *SwiftCurrent*, however, and indeed with my understanding of cyberspace as a diasporic space, is the hope of building a community without shared physical location. "I see the site as describing a possible culture that probably just doesn't exist yet in a real-world space," Stefans states in a *Publishers Weekly* article by Michael Scharf.

That same article by Scharf also points out that Circulars "had 53,000 hits in a recent week and has been logging close to 3,000 unique visitors a day" in the first two months of its inception; "compared with the figures ... for printed poetry volumes, that seems fairly staggering" (n.pag.). In comparison to other poetic works, then, Circulars was in that sense not so limited after all, at least for the duration of one specific period of time. Stefans summarizes that "As a form safe-guarding the right to trouble national self-identity ..., Circulars can be seen not only as a 'poem' but as a romantic and utopian one, even if its effects are non-lyrical and of an ambient nature" ("Toward" 281). This statement would seem to pit "ambient" in opposition to the political project of questioning national self-identity through the use of the phrase "even if." The word "ambient" is another that recurs in Stefans' vocabulary; he uses it to introduce "Dreamlife" as well, putting it against classic concrete poetry and avant-garde feminist practice by aligning the ambient with the "just plain fun." Is "Dreamlife" more ambient and therefore less political than Circulars? Is Circulars able to be more explicitly political because it is less ambient? Or does the fact that "ambient" is always brought up in a coexisting relationship with

political aims hint at something more than just simple opposition? Like Stefans' question in the blurb for *Fashionable Noise*, what is a political ambient poetics and where can I get one?

Tan Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, and the Political Ambient

Stefans' usage of the word "ambient" is influenced by the poet Tan Lin, who frequently uses the term "ambient stylistics" to describe his poetics. Darren Wershler-Henry suggests that this style may be related to Charles Bernstein's feeling that a younger generation of poets are asking "whether or not it was possible to jettison opacity [...] and still have a piece of radical writing," in that "the whole notion of ambience as a metaphor" may be one way to approach that question (*Fashionable* 34). Stefans responds that he is unsure if ambient stylistics would *want* to position itself as radical; he sees it as more related to the work of musician Brian Eno, who named the genre of and popularized ambient music, and described "his working method as finding all the extremes and then moving back to a more 'useful' position" (34).

Tan Lin is a contemporary Chinese American poet and multi-media Web artist who is explicitly influenced by Brian Eno, but also by disco music, Internet culture, cookbooks, and golf courses. He is interested in spaces where consumers are much more relaxed about what they are getting out of the experience and much less worried about whether they are doing it in order, correctly, or to completion, in contrast to how we conventionally read literature. Since his first book, *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe* (1996), Lin has explored how the systems of textual distribution and consumption that surround us in our digital era shape the production of subjectivity. His practice of ambient stylistics "reproduces the aspirations of architecture and ambient music to create 'surrounding influences' [also a phrase from Eno]—environments that filter tacitly into consciousness," as poetry scholar Nikki Skillman puts it (244). Skillman suggests that this puts

the reader into what Timothy Morton calls "a state of nondual awareness that collapses the subject-object division" (qtd. in Skillman 244), which seems to be the conceptual opposite of Stefans' desire to create a *verfremdungseffekt* with "Dreamlife"—rather than the kind of ambience that estranges the reader from the content of the source text and makes them think about the language of it more critically, Lin's ambience instead gently submerges readers into a shallow pool where content and language do not really matter.

I argue that we need to understand Lin's ambient aesthetic needs to be analyzed through an Asian diasporic reading framework. In an interview I conducted for *Contemporary Literature*, Brian Kim Stefans says something about the divorcing of racial content from digital poetry as a result of a failure to see it as part of a larger oeuvre, which has remained influential to my thinking in this chapter. He states that because of the varied genres of his work, "it's easy to take that conceptual writing thing and not attach it to a central person." As is a writer "who has a digital work here and something else over there," Stefans' work suffers from being picked through without that sense of larger context, making "easy to say that this conceptual work doesn't have any kind of ethnic interest or doesn't have any kind of sociopolitical interest" when it in fact does. Similarly, the ethnic and sociopolitical interests of Lin's ambient poetics reveal themselves through a change in reading context. In this section, I first explain how to define Lin's ambient poetics. Then, I move on to perform an Asian diasporic reading of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*. Critics Kenneth Goldsmith, Charles Bernstein, Jeff T. Johnson, and Kristen Gallagher have all done sustained readings of this work; though they write very incisively about the conceptual parts of it, they are limited to only seeing it as a commentary on reading genres and language, foregoing all mentions of race. I show that in doing so, they miss a fundamental part of *why* Lin chooses to engage with and critique language use through ambient

poetics: as a way express his racialized subjectivity. Lin himself says that *7CV* is "about growing up Chinese in Ohio" (*BOMB*), but no in-depth analytical work has been done yet to address this, and so I attempt to do so here.

Lin's intentional ambient shallowness works by pushing back against the analytical depth traditionally mandated by literature, especially what is usually labeled as poetry, but more than that it reflects the other reading environments we find ourselves in more often: browsing, skimming, ignoring, starting and stopping, interacting, editing, multi-tasking, and so forth. Lin draws on techniques such as re-mediation, crowdsourcing, plagiarism, and the creation of ephemeral sites to produce works that he still calls poetry because he wants to expand what we mean by poetry. To do this, he "exploit[s] the Internet's capacity for decentralizing authorship, stressing the dependence of memory and knowledge making on digital prostheses," showing how "the process of the self is improvised moment by moment" and affected by social, biological, and technological contexts (245).

In Tan Lin's own words, ambient stylistics is a set of guiding principles about how poetry should and should not be produced and received. In the preface to *BlipSoak01* (2003), Lin states that poems "should be uninteresting and non-metaphorical enough to be listened to in passing or while 'thinking of something else'" (13). "Ambient Stylistics," a cross-genre piece on the eponymous subject, slips in and out of autobiography, creative non-fiction, poetry, manifesto, and photograph essay; in it, Lin writes that a poem "should not describe but only skim (biographical) material we already knew," and "should exist on the edge of something that is no longer funny. In this way, it should create the meaningless passing of time, like disco music. A poem should have died just before we got to it" (127). These seemingly definitive opinions, however, are often allowed to contradict themselves. On the very same page that Lin declares

poems should not be about things that are not repeated, he also states that they "should be very repetitive" (127). Repetition, here, is more complex than repeating words or ideas in the same text. Lin tends to repeat 'biographical material we already knew' across the span of several works; his father's fascination with classic cars and Ronald Reagan recur in "Ambient Stylistics" and "A False Accounting" and *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, for example. A poem, he also states, should "repudiate all emotions except mechanical or chemical ones" (127), the irony being of course that all emotions are felt through mechanical and chemical functions in our bodies. Lin displays a hyperawareness, bordering on suspicion, of the kind of absorptive reading induced by things such as bestselling novel, the kind that pulls one into a thrall. In contrast, "A good poem is very boring. A great poem is more boring than the act of reading" (131), and poetry "should not be written to be remembered or absorbed it should be written to be forgotten" (138). Ambient stylistics, ultimately, "should inspire a deep sense of relax. Poetry need not say anything important or humanly meaningful, it should merely evoke" (140). And yet, we must take all of the above pronouncements with a grain of salt, because Lin also uses a tongue-in-cheek tone at least as often as he uses flippantness to mask the vulnerability of sincerity. Or: "Yes, I am lying to you. No I am not lying to you" (138).

Although he enacts his ambient stylistics in multiple works, the most obvious example, and the one that has gotten the most critical attention, is the Association for Asian American Studies Award for Poetry 2010 winner *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking* (henceforth referred to as *7CV* in this chapter). In this collection of found poetry, semi-autobiographical anecdotes, and visual material,²⁴ Lin's speaker states that "Airports, shopping malls, and golf courses are the most pleasing, crisis-free, and logo-ized of landscapes.

²⁴ This visual materials include scans of the back covers of many other books, ticket stubs, clothing tags, the packaging of a moist towelette, a matchbook, personal photographs, and more.

They are mood-inducing delivery systems, schematas of unimposed identifications that make irrelevant the distinction between pre- and post-consumption" (73). But how can one make reading as relaxing as a golf course? And is that really the question being answered in the attempt to do so? His wariness of novels recurs in *7CV*: "As anyone who has ever read a best-seller can tell you, reading experiences don't last very long and they tend to be as amorphous and formulaic as the individual human attention span will permit" (80). In contrast, "The most beautiful poems suggest [] experiences that are highly inattentive and unwritten and the most beautiful [] are merely superficial indicators for other sorts of peripheral, coded, programmatic, functional, or directional information" (80). The blank spaces enclosed in square brackets are part of Lin's text, not my additions, and they invite the reader to fill them with whatever, just as the text as a whole invites readers to fill their experience of it with the whatevers of their own outside lives. "Reading," after all, "should not be about something it should be about the nothings [sic] that occur before and after reading" (105).

Since it was published in 2010, looking at *7CV* does move us past this chapter's general purview of pieces from the early days of Web art and into more recent works. However, Tan Lin himself, as a writer, has been an early adopter since the 1990s and we should visualize *7CV* as a part of a larger oeuvre. As a computer-assisted but still printed work by an early adopter who continues to produce digital poetry, *7CV* therefore functions well as a bridge that links the chronological span of this chapter to the materials that will be explored in chapter four. As Lin describes it in an interview with Chris Alexander et al. for *Jacket2*,

In *7CV* printed matter (both text and image) has been captured/reproduced in numerous ways, with CCD (flatbed) scanning, digital photography of printed book pages, retyping of printed matter, reading and re-reading, bibliographic citation,

footnoting, indexing, and self-plagiarism of earlier sources. Machine reading involves parsing alpha numeric systems and metadata layers, OCR technology, word processing, data tagging, etc. *7CV* is a massive act of self plagiarism of the Lulu edition. [...] Some material in *7CV* is blogged or user-generated content.

Note that Lulu is an online, print-on-demand, self-publishing platform. In addition, Lin points out that this book, and indeed most books today, go through multiple states and files, from the MS Word version he wrote in 2003 to a failed publication with a small press in 2004, to the Lulu version and PDF download and then a print version put out by Wesleyan University Press in 2010. The edition of *7CV* I use in this chapter is the one printed by Wesleyan UP, more for ease of universal reference and access than any intended privileging of the press. Lin's descriptions of how he sees the production of *7CV*, in both matter and drafting platforms, echoes the early interests in exploring non-hierarchical forms of publication, collaboration, and blurring the reader/writer divide that we saw in the project of *SwiftCurrent* earlier in this chapter. Beyond the use of computing technology to create and distribute his works, Lin also incorporates our technological context into his conception of how his work is received. "Reading is a machine, an artificial system," Lin says in an interview in *BOMB Magazine*—"When the mind reads, it is part of this artificial system." Expanding upon that, Skillman states that "Lin reminds us that poems, computers, and minds are apparatuses defined by their limits," and that "the intrusive role such systems play in parsing and constraining the undifferentiated data flow that makes up experience is one of Lin's greatest themes" (247). The precepts of "ambient stylistics," with their emphasis on inattention and relaxation, may seem to advocate a lack of thinking, a state so blank that it is empty of not only politics but meaning at all, and yet there are alternative ways to interpret them as politically salient to the Asian diasporic reading framework.

Tan Lin as an artist is important as an early adopter of Internet technology as both medium and metaphor to talk about how our media environments affect our experiences of language, but he is also important in illustrating how the political application of the ambient helps us more broadly understand what the Asian diasporic reading framework offers beyond an obvious racial-political positioning. Nikki Skillman agrees that there is more going on in Lin's aspiration toward creating easy, unengaging, overall moods than it seems: "The proposition is neither as innocent nor as politically complacent as it sounds" (244). She points out that by doing the opposite of most art that tries to evoke heightened feelings, Lin "develops a mimetic art that blends in almost perfectly with the familiar patterns of experience that typify an increasingly technologized, consumption-driven reality"; his poetry is camouflaged as the surrounding environment, but just slightly "misalign[ed]" enough that it "casts them suddenly into relief" (244). Skillman understands Lin's disinterest in and indeed disdain for engineered emotional responses in his art as a demonstration of his doubt that "the expression of selfhood and elicitation of feeling per se are sufficient aims of literary art," in a world where we are subjected to a constant barrage of targeted marketing (243-4). *7CV*'s ludic flouting of category markers (the invented Library of Congress data used throughout, the acknowledgements taken from Timothy Bewes' *Reification: or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* without acknowledgement, the collaging of multiple found sources) serves as both an entertaining background noise and as a disruption of those categories, making forcing us to think about how easily we are swallowed into those categories at every moment.

Lin has created an irony, or something like a Buddhist koan, for he is asking us to think deeply about the process of not thinking too deeply about what you are reading. The kind of "acts of reading that [Lin] expects his audience to apply to his own writing" is "ephemeral,

inattentive" (Skillman 245), but for this to do the kind of political work that Skillman suggests, one would necessarily need to think very analytically about this ephemeral and inattentive experience afterward, as Skillman does. I argue that this concern with how readings are created—and also this self-awareness of one's inevitable proximity to the things one tries to induce from a distance—is an Asian diasporic concern. By examining how many of your deepest thoughts and feelings are simply triggered by genre cues, what Lin is really drawing attention to is how language is a form of control, and so are cultural and aesthetic expectations. And in *7CV*, he addresses not only the language of English but also Chinese, as well as the normativizing role that texts like cookbooks can play in the lives of Asian immigrant children growing up in the United States. Like the works of Brian Kim Stefans and even the *SwiftCurrent* editors, the issue at the core of *7CV* is the question of how language is produced and circulated, who has the power to control and access it. Ambient, after all, does not mean completely ignored. It means something that affects your mood, but on such an unobtrusive level that you may not notice it unless you make a point of paying attention to it, like the airport music pioneered by Eno and referenced in *7CV*'s subtitle of "[AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE]."

The 'Asianness' of *7CV*'s concerns, whatever that may mean, is also noted by Timothy Yu, who says that "Lin's work makes contact with Asian American writing in its awareness of the ways seemingly neutral systems of classification can structure and be structured by race, nation, and culture" (837). The recurring motif of cookbooks, referenced in *7CV*'s full title through its allusion to the *Joy of Cooking*, is one nexus where Lin's multiple interests converge. In terms of reading practice, cookbooks exemplify the kind of distracted, disinterested reading Lin wants to explore: they are almost never read from cover to cover with sustained attention,

but rather designed to be picked up and put down while doing another activity. And in terms of content, Lin explains in his interview with *BOMB Magazine* that the *Joy of Cooking* has "extreme relevance" to his experience "[growing] up Chinese American in southeast Ohio," where it functioned as "a culinary bible of things that are eaten in America" to his parents who only knew how to cook Chinese food. Eating American food signified being American, and so the *Joy of Cooking* became "an extremely important manual for our family in terms of reverse engineering." This categorizing of what makes food Chinese or American, and therefore what makes a person Chinese or American, is exactly the kind of reading system *7CV* is interested in, "a system within which the Asian American can be placed and located, or within which the Asian American reader can locate himself, vis-a-vis the other seemingly arbitrary categories that make up culture" (Yu 838).

Language itself, as we have seen throughout the chapters of this dissertation, is a system commonly scrutinized by writers of the Asian diaspora for its role in the power structures that keep subjects in their places and for its limitations and potentials to express hybrid subjectivities. *7CV* deals heavily with the reception of language, not only in English but also in Chinese. Chinese text appears on several pages of the book, including page eleven where the Simplified Chinese is simply a word for word translation of the editorial note on the previous page. On page thirty-two as well, the phrase "NIAGARA FALLS IS JUST A KIND OF PAINT" is translated word for word into Traditional Chinese directly below it. Deviating slightly from word for word translations, the last half of the last English sentence on page twenty-four ("those names for things canceling the wall would be more beautiful than anything we could feel") is also re-written in Traditional Chinese, but with a different nuance that I cannot fully explain in English. In one sense, this use of other scripts is reminiscent of Walter K. Lew's usage of Hanja in

Excerpts, to remind readers of the complexity of belonging as a poly-cultural subject, but unlike the more intensely poly-linguistic *Excerpts* the use of Chinese in *7CV* does not add any new information that is inaccessible to someone who does not read that language. Anyone who can read the Chinese realizes that it does not impart anything not already uttered in English. Readers who know both Chinese and English find out that readers who only know English are essentially missing no information, but a reader who knows only Chinese would miss out on the bulk of the work. The significance of the Chinese, perhaps fittingly with the project of *7CV* as a whole, is not semantic but experiential. Like a Chinese kid in Ohio, eating only the Fuzhou food your dad knows how to make keeps you on the fringes, but adding American food to your diet makes you more American.

All of the above instances of Chinese in *7CV* are in printed text, but one last occurrence of Chinese appears in an anecdote about the speaker buying his "first Chinese cookbook" and reading the recipes from it without ever cooking the dishes "because the recipes did not seem at all Chinese" (114). "Like most cookbooks," he writes, "this two-in-one book was about repression and memory disorders." He finds the language inside "colonial and depressing because the language used to describe pressed ducks and soy sauce and stir-fry and soup in dumpling or tin wok seemed too nostalgic to actually eat a meal in. What is the use of language if you cannot consume it?" (114). He tells his mother about a line in the book that claims "cornstarch is the glue that holds all Chinese food together," and reports that his mother

just laughed and laughed and said:

That is very true

OR:

That is a load of nonsense (hoo sha ba dao) (114)

Written underneath that last line are the Chinese words for "hoo sha ba dao," which literally translated means "eight ways to say nonsense," an idiom that essentially means "a load of nonsense." Unlike all the rest of the Chinese that appears in *7CV*, however, the words are upside down, in a reproduction of handwriting rather than a printed font. The upside down writing evokes the answers to riddles or puzzles printed in a newspaper, while the intimacy of handwriting embedded in a story about the speaker's mother is a direct contrast to the coldness of the alienating language in the cookbook.

But I want to stress that reading Lin's work—and indeed Stefans' work and Wah's work and all the other works in my dissertation—as Asian diasporic is not necessarily about finding something essentially Asian in it, or about picking out all the moments where they allude to race. In fact, doing so would not even be a particularly viable reading strategy, since many of the seemingly autobiographical anecdotes in *7CV* (the details about growing up Chinese in Athens, Ohio; his relationship with his father and his mother; how he met his wife) are peppered with unexpected lies, as though Lin has anticipated that temptation to read biographically and has thwarted it with fictions that do not corroborate across retellings. Lin's avoidance of straightforward autobiography is reminiscent of Wah's critical and creative approaches to the "biotext," and both stand in resistance to the dominant modes of reading "ethnic" writing through personal biography that I pointed out with *Dictée* in chapter two.

In that vein, I am also not really trying to argue that being of Asian descent means that all of these authors' works are automatically infused with an inescapable Asianness. This may be true for some of these artists' own conceptions of how subjectivity is shaped by their larger biographical context, but it is not, in my opinion, the most exciting reading one can do with a

diasporic framework. Rather, I am suggesting that a diasporic understanding of these experimental works allows us to see how experimental and electronic forms are conducive to expressing fragmented selves and non-straightforward relationships to language, which are major aspects of the diasporic experience. Using the diasporic reading lens is a strategy that resists the temptation to empty the ambient, and the experimental at large, of racial politics or to pretend that abstraction can exempt something from politics. On the other side of this equation, reading diasporically also allows us to see how experimental forms and techniques can be specifically chosen for how they can express ethnic concerns in ways that other more traditional means cannot.

Stripped to its core, *7CV* is really about reading, many other critics and reviewers have already pointed out. Lin himself also states this several different ways in several different interviews. In *Jacket2*, he calls *7CV* a collection of "various and conflictual reading practices across genres, regarded as social agreements, and hardware/software platforms," and not always "reading in the sense of what most people think about as 'reading a book of literature by a poet in a book published by a university press'" ("Writing as metadata container"). In *BOMB Magazine*, he talks about the book as a "neo-avant-garde" exercise in capturing "a culture of distraction today" as well as "modes of cognitive or pre-cognitive processing and affective attunement." And in a radio conversation with Colin Marshall, Lin states that "the book is supposed to open up and free a little bit of space around linear reading practices" ("Ambiently Breaking"). *7CV* is not only about what relationships can be built among the seemingly disparate collection of things and texts within, but about how we are always reading things and texts according to parameters that guide us, often unconsciously. I argue that this preoccupation with the internal and external factors that shape our behaviour should at least in be partially understood through an Asian

diasporic framework.

The stated goal of *7CV* is to be relaxing, easy to skim, encourage distraction. And yet, Lin admits that people often go up to him and say that they find the book quite difficult, perhaps because the expected reading practices for literary work are so deeply ingrained ("Ambiently"). The kinds of reading he asks for are more readily and easily done online, where few people find it difficult to skim, skip around, and be constantly distracted by new subject matter, and so "in some ways, [*7CV*] is about translating a book into a different kind of reading environment" like "social networking" ("Ambiently"). There is a juxtaposition of difficulty and effortlessness, and this contrast produces a heightened state of awareness of the contexts that cause a person a person to feel one rather than the other. A heightened awareness of how outside contexts shapes a person's insides is an apt way to describe the diasporic experience, and it is also one of several ways that *7CV*'s project about reading can be understood as a project about being Asian American.

To strip it to a different core, *7CV* can also be said to be "about growing up Chinese in Ohio and moving to New York City and trying to become a writer," which Lin points out in *BOMB*. The fact that it is ephemeral, non-linear, hard to define and lacking a clear plot trajectory does not make it any less autobiographical than a more stereotypical novel-length memoir. In fact, those characteristics are apt for expressing an identity that is "not fixed but context sensitive," such as a diasporic identity or an online one ("Writing as metadata"). For Lin, making it difficult for the reader to tell which stories are fabricated and which are truly autobiographical, which words are written by Lin and which are collaged from elsewhere, "heightens the self-constructed nature of identity, with a specific ethnic inflection" ("Ambiently Breaking"). As we have already seen previously in the works of Fred Wah, Jam Ismail, Theresa Hak Kyung

Cha, and more, there is a significant countercurrent to the more mainstream tradition of Asian immigrant narratives of growing up and searching for cultural belonging. These alternative works use unexpected forms, sometimes eschewing the lyric subject altogether, in order to not only tell autobiographical stories but confront the shortcomings of language, reading, fragmentation, and selfhoods shaped by forces beyond one's control. I suggest that it may be helpful to think of *7CV*'s method of engaging with these topics by generating moods that perhaps lead to contemplation as being part of an alternative genre of Asian diasporic experimental poetry, one that represents the experiences and anxieties shared by many members of the Asian diaspora.

Conclusion

When looking at the totality of the works that are covered in this chapter, and indeed in the whole of this dissertation, one might wonder why they are all classified as poetry, especially as we enter the more recent developments of digitalization and Web art. In "Privileging Language: The Text in Electronic Writing," Brian Kim Stefans raises the question of why we still turn to text, if we have entered an era of literary art (as some have argued) in which text is just one of many equal media elements at the artist's disposal. His answer is that words are not treated just like sound or light or colour, because "language as a very specific ability that humans possess" that has been shaped by centuries of enculturation; "certainly language *can* be used [as just a media element,] but even in these cases ... the contingencies of both history and culture (even race) play larger roles in their effects" (*Before* 298-9). Even the purely aesthetic enterprises that seem to use arbitrary juxtaposition of words and images, Stefans argues, rely to some degree on the force of semantic meanings as they are contingent with the reader's life experiences—an argument we have seen *7CV* deftly try to perform. Stefans also suggests that language is used in

electronic writing "to solve a formal problem in the artistic project—often to make the experience more concrete or to round out a metaphor—and that the electronic elements of the project have not come around in order to solve" (299). That is perhaps one way to delineate my archive of works analyzed in this dissertation, which to me have an internal consistency but to others may seem a jumble. I have chosen works where the poets use language to achieve something that cannot be replaced by the multimedia technology they also use, yet at the same time the larger artistic project is more than just the text. This choice is not a value judgement against poetry that uses other media as ornamental touches, or against digital art uninterested in poetry. Rather, it is a choice made as a direct result of the cultural history I am interested in tracing, a through line about poetry in the absence of one shared physical space that cyberspace just happens to be the latest incarnation of.

I also submit that there is another reason for privileging language in these works. "Poetry" works as a community signifier similar to the way "Asian" does—those who identify themselves as poets produce things that they expect people who call themselves poetry readers to be attracted to. While I am in fact very interested in other uses of electronic media, from web design to virtual reality to the organization of global protests, those usages move away from my scope as they are not as clearly connected to a network of ideas that I am trying to invoke when I use a phrase like "Asian diasporic experimental poetry from the 1980s to now."

Even while accounting for the privileging of language in new media poetry, there are still works like "Dreamlife" and *7CV* that are less interested in the semantic impact of language as evolved over the centuries and more interested in subverting that impact in order to produce a different experience. There is perhaps a temptation to dichotomize new media poetic work into these two different camps: *SwiftCurrent* and *Circulars* would seem to fit into the former,

"Dreamlife" and *7CV* into the latter. The neatness of this dichotomy, however, is troubled by the fact that Stefans engineered both "Dreamlife" and *Circulars*, just as Tan Lin creates works such as *7CV* while also writing intimately lyric personal works such as "A False Accounting." Poets and readers do not have a single identity, and the poetry they produce and consume do not either. And even putting that aside, the works covered in this chapter can be made to do work on both poles of the false dichotomy as well as along the spectrum in between. The very act of experiencing language is understood to be political, contingent, contextual, even if the experience hinges on arbitrariness or the emptying of denotative meaning.

Finally, Stefans also points out that although language is a natural human capacity, reading is not, and "even with the most basic human/ text interface, text does not enter the mind so easily"; any further manipulation of the interface—even just putting the text onto a screen instead of a page, but of course all other types of more complex interactivity—increases difficulty (306). However, "as in most writing that involves forms, especially poetry, these limitations can be seen as constraints that will serve to demonstrate deeper properties of language that might never have been seen before" (306). The limitations presented by the chosen forms and projects of the Asian diasporic early adopters covered in this chapter were taken as artistic challenges, from the technological and accessibility challenges in *SwiftCurrent*, to the obsolescence and technical issues in "Dreamlife," to the conceptual problematics of reading itself in *7CV*. The ways these poets solved, worked around, or accepted these limitations as part of the medium all contribute to the larger development of this thing I call Asian diasporic poetics in the era of burgeoning electronic media, on the cusp of the explosion the age of social media that will be explored in chapter four.

Chapter Four. Collaborative Poem-Works: Political Community and Virtual Networks in the 21st Century

In 1991, in her influential *Radical Artifice*, Marjorie Perloff wrote that "the most common response to what has been called the digital revolution has been simple rejection" (3). The privilege of hindsight allows us to see that the technophobic response perceived by Perloff was only fleeting: digital platforms are now embraced by many writers, whether in the form and material of their works or in their interactions and collaborations with their audience and each other. In observing this, we must also observe that the digital environment of today is much more dominated by social media than the one described in *Radical Artifice*. Frank Davey and Fred Wah expressed that what they wanted most out of *SwiftCurrent* was the creation of virtual community, and Brian Kim Stefans states that "when [he] first started doing work with computers and poetry, [his] initial inclination was to form a 'group' of some sort" (*Fashionable* 19). However, the development of social media technology and culture has advanced far beyond what they were first able to achieve with *SwiftCurrent* and arras.net. What does online poetic community look like today? What has changed since the era of early adopters, and what has remained the same?

This fourth chapter of my dissertation will centre around sites of political community and network creation on the contemporary Internet. In the same year that Perloff was forcefully arguing that art cannot remain apart from and untouched by the popular media landscape, Wah was claiming that the very form and language of poetry can be political: "the ethnopoetics tool box ... [is] shared by writers who are marginalized, invisible, experimental, political, and in need of any tool that might imagine a culture that could recognize an alien identity and construct a common language of the other" (*Faking* 66). I argue that these tools have evolved in the virtual

spaces of both diaspora and the Internet, and that marginalized writers of today can create large collaborative online projects to both respond to dominant culture and carve out shared spaces/places with each other. It is not currently an all-inclusive strategy, as the Internet access and usage data from the previous chapter has shown, but it would be counterproductive to pretend that forces such as the rapid spread of Internet connectivity and the increasing adoption of mobile smart devices are not fundamentally changing how we interact—with each other, with media, and with language.

Questions taken up in previous chapters return with new nuances in this chapter, and I explicitly list them here for ease of reference because the structure of this chapter will be slightly more convoluted. I hope that referring back to this list through the use of subsection titles will help keep things clear. The three main themes to be re-investigated in this chapter are as follows:

- A. The crux of my theoretical work in this dissertation asks the reader to imagine diaspora as community based not upon shared physical spaces but rather upon shared experiences. Can we now also imagine it as a community of shared actions, despite these actions not taking place in the same physical spaces, because simultaneous action and virtual presence are now possible through digital technology?
- B. Through the progression of my chapters, we have seen how various Asian diasporic poets engage with formal experimentation in some way. The nature of that experimentation changes as the available technology changes, from creative ways of subverting text-only forms, to image-and-text and multimedia experiences presented through print, to animation and real-time interaction through electronic media, all of which blur the line between creator and audience. What new ways of playing with form and hierarchy does the contemporary social media-focused Internet allow?

- C. My understanding of the personal and the poetic as political has been influenced by Wah's formulation of poetic form as an expressive toolbox for marginalized groups in need of a language not created and approved by the dominant majority that alienates them. How have existing tools evolved in the virtual spaces of diaspora and the Internet in the twenty-first century, and what new tools have been added to the toolkit?

The archive of works I will explore in this chapter will mainly consist of Brian Kim Stefans' *Circulars*, Sachiko Murakami's interactive online *Project Rebuild*, and a collaborative project called *The Collected Poems of YFC* hosted on the Tumblr platform. I will also draw in an assortment of other Web projects and virtual media events to be read in less depth, to round out my investigation. The similarities that I see as shared between the works I have chosen to analyze in this chapter are summarized by the term "**collaborative poem-works**," a categorization I have created and apply to *Circulars*, *Project Rebuild*, and *The Collected Poems of YFC*. A collaborative poem-work is an artistic work wherein one main person or group sets up the overarching premise and makes primary artistic decisions about the concept, format, and execution of the piece, after which other contributors are invited to add to them within the parameters laid out by the primary creator. The only other full-length work I have found so far that engages with a similar grouping of works as I do is a doctoral dissertation on poetry in the age of new media by Maria Engberg. However, Engberg also sees in her chosen archive a common theme of "active embodied engagement that is required of the reader/user in some digital poems and the denial of an active participation in others" being "part of the works' materiality" (Abstract). I would argue that while the main three works I analyze in this chapter allow for and encourage "active embodied engagement," it is not required in order to experience

the work as a reader/user; at the same time, none of the three works force a denial of active participation, although it is also an option if the reader/user wants to consume more passively.

There are important reasons I choose to call them poem-works, rather than just collaborative works. To label a work as a poem is a deliberate action that triggers further acts of interpretation, as well as evokes a connection to a larger conversation about what poetry is and does. Dorothy Wang identifies a "familiar 'literary versus culture' divide within literary studies" (2) that separates a western white tradition, coded as 'race-less' or 'abstract,' from all other ethnic writing, and categorizes the former as serious literature and the latter as mere identity politics. Despite "the important work of a dozen or so poetry critics who do attend to the inseparability of the aesthetic and the sociopolitical" (11), this separation is a commonly accepted view among many critics. It should be apparent by now that the readings I have so far done in this dissertation, as well as the ones I will be doing in this chapter, are planted firmly on the side of the aesthetic and sociopolitical being inseparable. One reason, therefore, to use the word "poem-work" for works that can also easily be called websites or public projects or collaborative blogs is to keep these works grounded in the context Wang identifies—the context of contemporary poetry where "an avant-garde minority poet is ... not infrequently viewed as an oxymoron. If such poets are included in avant-garde poetry gatherings, they often figure as token bodies who 'write like us' (and not like those 'bad' identity-based brown or yellow poets)" (272). Calling these works "poem-works" acknowledges that they can be seen as many sorts of works, but emphasizes seeing them as poetry first in order to recognize their significance as experimental works by minority poets who do not shy away from expressing vested sociopolitical interests *through* avant-garde forms.

Another reason for using the term "poem-works" is not about defining the works in and of themselves, but rather about prompting the audience to read the works in a certain way regardless of what they 'are.' The hyphenated "poem-works" allows that these works can be read in other ways, but establishes that in this chapter they are being read as poems. For Terry Eagleton, what differentiates poetry analysis from general literary analysis or all close reading is attention to form. To read something as poetry is to get "away from only content analysis to questions about "attending to language in all of its material density" (2). Additionally, "[t]here is a politics of form as well as a politics of content. Form is not a distraction from history but a mode of access to it" (8). The Russian Formalists talk about 'literariness' as a quality of language that foregrounds its strangeness, and show that to read language poetically is to closely attend to this estrangement effect. Of course, the distinction between form and content is not easily delineated, nor is it immutable. Eagleton basically categorizes form as "such aspects of the poem as tone, pitch, rhythm, diction, volume, metre, pace, mood, voice, address, texture, structure, quality, syntax, register, point of view, punctuation, and the like," and content as "a matter of meaning, action, character, idea, storyline, moral vision, argument, and so on" (66). The latter is semantic, while the former is non-semantic; to read something poetically involves paying more intensive attention to the non-semantic aspects than we would when not reading poetically.

By reading the archive of this chapter as poem-works, I direct my analytical focus onto formal elements as well as other aspects like collaborative interactions and the multi-media features of these works that may not be otherwise thought of as analyzable through a poetic reading. In the conclusion of the previous chapter, I summarized Brian Kim Stefans' answer to the question of why we still cling to text-, language-, and poetry-based labels for electronic art that would seem to be more than textual. He suggests that the semantic sway of language is such

that it has power over the non-semantic, even as his works blur the line between what counts as semantic or non-semantic. By demonstrating that the collaborative and interactive elements of these poem-works can be poetically read as form and analyzed for their relation to content, I am further complicating the already complex relationship between semantic and non-semantic, but hopefully in a productive way that shows new facets of these Asian diasporic works.

Stefans' *Circulars*, as explained in chapter three, is a multi-author blog where poets and artists responded to the 2003 American invasion of Iraq of Iraq," conceptualized as somewhere between a 'poem' and a 'community'" (Stefans, *Before* 275). Although posting was by Stefans' invitation only, commenting was open to all and the project strongly encouraged interactive communication and circulation. However, it is perfectly possible to read the whole blog through as one text without involving oneself and, indeed, this is the way I experienced the blog as a reader fourteen years after the its creation. I analyze the different ways of experiencing it as part of the text as a whole.

Vancouver-based poet Sachiko Murakami's Project Rebuild is an interactive webpage that asks readers/users to constantly "renovate" poems on the site. Beginning with "Vancouver Special," a single poem written by Murakami about a housing design unique to Vancouver, she then ran her poem "through Google Translate and back again through four languages of people [she has] known who have lived in Vancouver Specials—Cantonese, Italian, Portuguese and Serbian—and back to English again" ("About"). The resulting, subtly different poems were sent to various other poets who remixed them as they saw fit. The texts created by these poets then became the "original occupants" of the Project Rebuild virtual neighbourhood, each housed in a clickable line drawing of a Vancouver Special. Visitors to the website can click on any house and "move in" to the poem; clicking on the "renovate" option then puts the poem into an editable

textbox, where the user can produce a new text; submitting that text adds a new Vancouver Special onto the front page. There is no vetting of submissions. While exploring the houses by following the threads of previous renovations and adding renovations of your own are the interactions most obviously facilitated by Murakami's site design, the reader can certainly choose to read the (as of October 12, 2017) over 430 accumulated poems in the Project Rebuild neighbourhood by methodically clicking on each house. Again, I consider the different ways of interacting with this poem-work to be part of the text itself in analyzing it.

Finally, The Collected Poems of YFC was produced as a creative response against the cultural appropriation and claims of 'reverse racism' in the poetry industry made by a white poet named Michael Derrick Hudson after he submitted poems under the Chinese pseudonym of Yi-Fen Chou, which was eventually revealed to be the real name of a woman he had known in high school. A group of Asian North American poets, including but not limited to myself, Timothy Yu, Kenji Liu, Karissa Chen, Ray Hsu, Amish Trivedi, Sueyeun Juliette Lee, Kazumi Chin, and others used the Tumblr platform to publish responses, poems, satirical memes, and parodies collectively, with permission from the Chou family to use the name Hudson had appropriated. The project's work was recognized by the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog, and was in conversation with other poets and online commentators during the height of its run. I will go into more detail about the many interactive and collaborative elements of this project later in the chapter, but anyone can also just go to real-yi-fen-chou.tumblr.com and read the entries as one would read any webpages. My usage of this poem-work in this chapter shows how to read this constellation of activities and linkages altogether as a text, including the behind-the-scenes conversations that happened alongside the creation of the main Tumblr blog.

Out of necessity, this chapter will contain more classification and description of the content and formal features of the works analyzed than previous chapters have done. This is partially because the works in this chapter's archives are less well known and harder to explain, spanning across time, space, media, and lines drawn between creator and consumer in ways that require more explication than more conventional texts for readers who are unfamiliar with them. Electronic literature is still a comparatively new field of study in literary criticism, and I have noticed that a lot of the secondary sources in this field involve trying to come up with labels and then cataloguing works or techniques into them. While this kind of work is useful in a field's nascent stages, I hope we are entering into a stage beyond that; even in my descriptions, I hope I am describing and therefore drawing attention to things that I think specifically pertain to a larger critical interest in Asian diasporic reading and how that framework relates to these collaborative poem-works. Another reason for the more expository, meandering compilational feeling of this chapter is that I am engaging with a framework that locates non-hierarchical interactivity as a central factor in expanding my theses from past chapters in this new age of social media. I implicitly and explicitly address how collaborative poem-works subvert the goal-oriented nature of corporatized technology in favour of a wandering, *dérive*-like aesthetic—the more wandering structure of this chapter takes after what it addresses.

As I progress through the three major areas of exploration listed as subsections of this chapter, I will delve more deeply into the aspects of my chosen collaborative poem-works that become relevant to the topic being explored. While I have already explained the foundational importance of poetry analysis to the work I do in this chapter, because this chapter focuses on projects that are in multiple senses 'social,' it will also use methods and studies from the social sciences. My methodologies reflect my training in literary criticism rather than sociology or

anthropology, but I borrow useful elements and vocabulary from those fields whenever it makes sense to do so. For example, since I was a participant observer of sorts in the Collected Poems of YFC project, it would make sense to follow some guidelines of auto-ethnography in order to best present my findings and analyze them in hindsight. To this end, I have found Christine Hine's *Ethnography for the Internet* very helpful for framing how ethnography can be done in virtual spaces.

Although ethnography was originally founded on the premise that spending time with subjects in person is the most important way to learn about them, Hine proposes that the method must change and adapt to how virtual communication has evolved to become part of our actual, 'in person' lives. If the heart of the ethnographic method is "its use of the embodied experiences of the researcher as one of its primary means of discovery," and "[t]he ethnographer's immersion may involve taking part in the same activities that people living in the setting carry out" (19), then we must recognize that Internet activities have become "embedded, embodied, and everyday" experiences for many contemporary subjects. Hine calls this way of looking at the Internet the "E³ Internet." As people have come to be "more accepting of the things that people do on the Internet as being real, socially meaningful activities" (8), Hine observes that the Internet is "is often not experienced as a transcendent 'cyberspace' in contemporary society, but has become something which is embedded into people's lives in ways which are meaningful within specific contexts" (14). Again, we see how conceptualizations of diaspora are echoed in this E³ Internet. Members of a diaspora do not often think that they are going into a separate space to 'be diasporic'; rather, their diasporic identity is part of their larger life, similar to how many users no longer think of logging onto the Internet to 'be online' rather than to "find ourselves being online in an extension of other ways of being and acting in the world" (14). One

can of course visit specific physical spaces meant to evoke a diasporic experience, like a Chinatown, just as one can go to a specific chatroom devoted to talking about the Internet, but in general the idea of being part of a diaspora is more of a lived experience than something discrete from the rest of one's life.

Hine argues that the Internet should "be construed simultaneously as a cultural site, where people [do] things, and a cultural artefact" and that "ethnographic strategies [can] usefully encompass both aspects, and explore how they [are] mutually entangled" (30). This approach allows me to both read the collaborative poem-works as pieces of literature (an artifact) and to analyze the collaborative activities involved in their production and consumption (a cultural site), combining the two into a consideration of the text as encompassing both. These two aspects are most obviously factors in my study of the YFC Tumblr, as I will be looking at both the actual Tumblr site itself and also the behind-the-scenes conversations among the primary poets, conducted largely through Facebook chat, to examine the process of creating the work and how Asian diasporic writers use social media to establish community. However, keeping these dual facets in mind will also be useful for talking about other collaborative poem-works, as they are artifacts to be read but also deliberately designed as spaces of interaction. Analyzing how Project Rebuild plays with themes of property and ownership is, for example, subtly different from analyzing how a reader/user navigates the text renovation interface, although of course it is also key to my argument that Asian experimental poets turn to the Internet because of how both aspects (artifact and cultural activity) can be made to supplement the other in a project.

Another important point about ethnography on the Internet that I want to highlight is Hine's suggestion that "because the ethnographer ... uses the same media as participants, and because those very media are at the same time the object of inquiry and the medium of inquiry,

the ethnographer has an authentic insight into the conditions of existence as lived through those media" (82). I should clarify that although I call myself a participant observer for the purposes of this chapter, my first encounters with all of these collaborative poem-works were not with the objective of writing this chapter in mind. I was genuinely participating in the YFC Tumblr project as a poet and active social media user. I knew partway through the experience that I would want to analyze our activities later on as part of my dissertation (and notified everybody in the Facebook chat to this end), but it was long before the vision of this chapter was conceived and so unlike a proper social researcher I did not enter the cultural site with a specific intention or, to be honest, much foresight. And whereas ethnography prizes a whole picture approach, I am looking narrowly at these works and their contexts only insofar as they are relevant to the dissertation—I am not fully examining how they are embedded in the context of each participant's life or anything like that, because I am not trying to draw an anthropological conclusion about modern digital life. I am analyzing the different ways in which the Internet accommodates collaborative poetic projects, not from the angle of understanding human behaviour but from the angle of understanding how these projects share through lines with the poetic activities I have covered in previous chapters and what new ground they strike. Ultimately, I borrow terms and strategies from ethnography to help ground myself in an otherwise nebulous field that has not yet established many of its own traditions, but what I am doing is literary analysis rather than anthropology.

A) A Cyberspatial Diaspora: Simultaneous Action and Virtual Presence

Before the proliferation of social media, the idea of a Web-based mass movement that blurs the lines between online and offline activity would have been harder to describe. However,

in the contemporary media environment, this very idea has become so commonplace that it is truly embedded in our everyday lives. One example is the use—or, as I will argue, related but different uses—of social media hashtags to coordinate Internet activism, which is now so widespread that mainstream media outlets use the term 'hashtag activism' for it. Hashtags are an opt-in categorizing system on social networking platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Facebook, used to organize conversations by allowing users to see all posts tagged with the keywords of their choice. Some notable examples include #Kony2012, #BringBackOurGirls, #BlackLivesMatter, #IdleNoMore, and #UmbrellaMovement—a non-exhaustive list, of course, but named here because they will be referred to again later in this section. I want to suggest in this section that political expressions enacted through social media platforms, of which hashtag activism is just one example, should be read through more frameworks than how traditionally effective they are or how much awareness they raise. They can also be read and critiqued as community-building activities and as artistic work. A poetic relationship between form and content also comes into play for effective digital movements, and they allow for a re-imagining of sharing non-physical space. Diasporic reading, as established in chapter one, allows us to pull together works that define shared places not through physical land ownership with governmental recognition but through the imagination of the people. Hong Kong diasporic writers such as Dung Kai-cheung and Leung Ping-kwan ground this imagination in shared experience and memory, but the #UmbrellaMovement suggests possible new directions for virtual spaces of shared action.

Hashtag activism has been criticized as a form of 'slacktivism,' a pejorative term for low-effort, low-involvement, often online actions such as posting a hashtag or signing a petition that critics posit do little to effect change. The primary concerns of those who criticize slacktivism is

that it is a narcissistic act more focused on the positive feelings of the actor than on the end result, that it does not actually contribute to the ostensible cause it claims to support, and that it may in fact take away from the cause either by satisfying the urge to do something and therefore leading people to not act in other more concrete ways or by causing "activism fatigue" through overuse (van Dijck, 87). A quick overview of the titles of several mainstream media articles reveals that commentators are very interested in discussing the limitations of hashtag activism: "Hashtag Activism, and Its Limits" (*New York Times*), "Hashtag activism proliferating, but is it effective?" (*The Herald-Sun*), "#BringBackOurGirls: Why hashtag activism has its critics" (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*), "George Will: Hashtag Activism 'Not Intended To Have Any Effect On The Real World'" (*RealClearPolitics*), "Clicktivism is ruining leftist activism" (*The Guardian*). Eric Augenbraun, author of "Occupy Wall Street and the limits of spontaneous street protest," is credited with being the first known media use of the term 'hashtag activism.'

Augenbraun stated that the 2011 protest movement against economic inequality that began in New York and spread through social media to multiple cities around the world would likely "achieve no measurable political change," because these protests "draw from a relatively narrow pool of self-selecting participants" who are not interested in leadership structures or coalitions with established movements, and are therefore "likely to skew towards a voluntaristic politics of 'witness-bearing'." "The advent of 'hashtag activism' has been greeted with breathless claims about the birth of a new form of technology-based social movement," Augenbraun writes, but while new technologies are useful tools, "they do not represent alternatives to the exhausting, age-old work" of gradual, in-person political change. But is this a failure of hashtag activism, or is it a sign that the best use of these technologies is not to function as replacements but rather as supplements, and as something different in their own right?

David Carr's *New York Times* article "Hashtag Activism, and Its Limits" begins with a skepticism similar to Augenbraun's. Carr suspects that the low investment cost of hashtag activism ("In the friction-free atmosphere of the Internet, it costs nothing more than a flick of the mouse to register concern about the casualties of far-flung conflicts") directly translates to an unlikelihood that people would want to do "more than burnish their digital avatars." He also questions whether there is any motivation to do anything beyond online posturing if the desired outcome is simply performing or broadcasting altruism to impress online friends. That said, Carr details how he was certain that an online campaign to change a documentary's rating would fail because the traditional way to indicate support or opposition to a film is ticket sales, not online petitions. Contrary to Carr's expectations, the chairman of the Motion Picture Association of America was in fact very receptive to online input and was already working on a compromise with the film's distribution company. The result of "a very traditional organization responding with an open mind to a netroots outcry" causes Carr to rethink his "cynicism." While he still concludes that "the so-called weak ties of digital movements are no match for real world engagement," he also resolves that "they are not only better than nothing, they probably make the world, the one beyond the keyboard, a better place."

Journalists and social commentators are not the only ones who have written on the subject, however. Social scientists studying online activism have drawn some conclusions that directly address specific worries about the limitations and risks of online engagement. Henrik Serup Christensen draws the conclusion that while it is not possible to collect data about every Internet campaign that ever existed to calculate the percentage of their effectiveness, there is also no evidence of "the substitution thesis," i.e. the suggestion that online activism replaces or damages real-life civic engagement. In fact, he finds that "Most evidence in recent years suggests

that being active online promotes off-line participation as well," and that "most recent research suggests a positive — albeit weak — link between online activity and engagement in off-line political participation," which suggests that involvement in relatively low-effort political activity online can reinforce offline activities (n.pag.). A study published in 2011 by Georgetown University's Center for Social Impact Communication and conducted in partnership with Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, entitled "Dynamics of Cause Engagement," presents statistical evidence for the positive link between on- and offline engagement. A survey of 2000 Americans over the age of eighteen was conducted from November 30 to December 22, 2010, and this study has a margin of error of +/-2.2% at the 95% confidence level. It finds that social media promoters of social causes are twice as likely to volunteer their time than non-social media promoters (30% vs. 15%), more than four times as likely to encourage others to contact political representatives (22% vs. 5%), and five times as likely to recruit others to sign petitions for a cause or social issue (20% vs. 4%). In addition, those who promote activism online are equally likely as those who do not to donate money in support of a cause (41% vs. 41%). One key takeaway of this study, the authors suggest, is to "think beyond stereotypes: so-called slacktivists are more active than you may think." At least in America, those "who support causes by participating in promotional social media activities are engaged in a greater number of different kinds of supporting activities than Americans who do not use social media to engage with causes" (38). The authors interpret these results to mean that "social media activities actually supplement— rather than replace—the range of historically prominent types of cause engagement activities" (38).

What all of these detractors and defenders of online activism have in common is a shared concentration on effectiveness as defined by measurable real-world policy change, especially in

the immediate short term. I want to suggest, however, that there are other ways to interpret what is achieved by online engagement, beyond the simple vagaries of 'raising awareness' and yet also beyond this narrow definition of effectiveness. We can look to longer term effects, as well as evaluate it as a form of community-building and/or artistic expression. It is too homogenizing to see all hashtag activism as having the same ends, simply because they use the same medium of transmission. Of the hashtags I previously listed as notable examples, some are used as a show of support for a time-specific end goal: #Kony2012²⁵ and #BringBackOurGirls²⁶ were both shared without any expectation of direct or personal actions on the part of the sharers themselves—at worst they were merely shared because they were trendy, and at best they were used to pressure governmental and law enforcement authorities into action. In contrast, #BlackLivesMatter (or #BLM)²⁷ and #IdleNoMore²⁸ were used to organize protests and events as well as to share personal experiences in a way that was intended to directly involve the sharer of the hashtag. The virtual nature of the electronic medium is thematically significant to these two projects.

#BLM and #IdleNoMore are responses to both specific events and larger systemic issues of white supremacist violence. In these two hashtag movements, absence, or the inability to be

²⁵ A viral movement started by the non-profit organization Invisible Children to bring attention to Ugandan militia leader and indicted war criminal Joseph Kony, with the goal of having him arrested by the end of 2012. It should be noted that this campaign has been widely criticized by experts on the politics of the affected regions for deliberately using misinformation to oversimplify a complex issue.

²⁶ A global social media response to the 2014 kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, perpetrated by the extremist terrorist group Boko Haram. Rescue efforts remain ongoing, with 195 of the girls still captive as of January 2017. The hashtag is notable for its celebrity involvement, as numerous Hollywood actors and popular musicians joined the social media campaign.

²⁷ As the social media arm of the international activist BLM movement, #BlackLivesMatter started trending in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of African American teenager Trayvon Martin. It continues to be used in responses to ongoing police violence against African Americans.

²⁸ The hashtag #IdleNoMore was started in December 2012 by Canadian indigenous activists to spread awareness of opposition to the sweeping erosion of waterway protections introduced by the Canadian federal government in Bill C-45. The use of social media allowed the Idle No More movement to spread to other countries where indigenous peoples face similar land and water claim struggles.

present, is part of the conversation—people who have died, been removed, are incarcerated, are ignored, or are coerced not to speak up in real life are central to their concerns. In a 2016 study of the impact of #BLM, Deen Freelon et al. write that while "BLM borrowed many of its digital tactics from prior movements," the "most substantial difference between it and its predecessors has to do with the nature of police brutality as an issue. Simply put, it is extremely well-suited to internet-based activism" (82). Unlike other, more abstract issues, "police brutality is concrete, discrete in its manifestations, and above all, visual. Hashtagged names and other digital memorials remind the public of the irreplaceable losses felt by the victims' families" (82). Freelon et al. expand their conclusions to suggest that "the success of born-digital social movements may be linked with the specific issue being championed" (83)—when the form is intimately linked to the content, Internet movements are effective not only in traditional activist senses but also in solidarity-building, affective, and expressive senses.

Internet technology allows for not only new ways to express absence and presence, but even new ways to conceptualize co-presence. In sociology, 'co-presence' is a term that "describes the conditions in which human individuals interact with one another face to face from body to body" (Zhao 445). The increasing ability of technology to create a feeling of virtual presence has caused sociologists to define co-presence as being composed of two dimensions: physically being with others, and the sense or experience of being with others.²⁹ While digital technology cannot (yet) faithfully produce every aspect of the former, technological advancements have caused social scientists to take renewed interest in theorizing the latter. These new technologies have also been used to play with different experiential features of co-presence for activist and artistic ends. One example is the concept of hologram protests, two of which took place in Madrid in 2015 and Seoul in 2016 to protest similar laws cracking down on Spanish and South

²⁹ For more detailed information about co-presence, see "Toward a Taxonomy of Copresence" by Shanyang Zhao.

Korean citizens' rights to gather and demonstrate in front of government buildings. The Seoul protest, organized by Amnesty Korea, involved a virtual gathering of over 120 volunteers filmed against a blue screen and projected as life-sized holograms across a screen facing Gwanghwamun, an ancient palace gate in the centre of the city that symbolizes Seoul's long history as the capital of the country. The holograms marched and encouraged citizens to upload their voices to the Amnesty website. "Freedom of speech and assembly has deteriorated since [then-president] Park Geun-hye took office [...]. Why can we hold a demonstration here only as ghosts? That's what we want to ask," said Ahn Se-young, a campaign manager at Amnesty Korea (Kang). The use of holograms not only points out the injustice of the legislation and police suppression, but also cunningly circumvents it: whereas Amnesty Korea's initial request to hold a rally was rejected, the holographic version was accepted on the grounds that it was a cultural event rather than a demonstration. Like the hashtag movements that emphasized absence and a turn to virtual presence, as well as solidarity and simultaneous action, this application of technology shows how a lack of shared physical space does not have to prevent community building—a conclusion we have already seen in the case study of Hong Kong literature in chapter one.

Artists and organizers in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement also experimented with technology to bring virtual presence to the protest. Similar to some of the other hashtag movements I have described previously, the 2014 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong against the PRC's Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) used a hashtag, #UmbrellaMovement, to spread news, organize protesters, and gather support.³⁰ Even more

³⁰ The specific event that first triggered protests was the NPCSC's decision to implement a highly selective pre-screening process for Hong Kong chief executive election candidates. In essence, the only nominations would be those approved by Beijing. The protest movement was called Occupy Central early on, as a direct call back to Occupy Wall Street. The umbrella imagery was adopted after clashes with the police resulted in widespread and

significantly, the hashtag and other online activities also allowed those in the Hong Kong diaspora around the world—myself and my parents included—to feel part of this important political moment, to experience presence without being present.

One example of other online activities is a project called the 'Add Oil' Machine, launched by a media art collective called Stand By You. The name is a reference to the Chinese colloquialism 加油 (literally "add oil," as in to add more fuel to a fire) used to encourage the addressee to keep going. The 'Add Oil' Machine included a website where people from around the world could type messages of support for the protest, which scrolled in real time on the website. The artists curated messages from this feed and chose relevant ones to magnify and project onto the sides of buildings in and around the main protest sites in central Hong Kong. The writer Adario Strange calls it "crowd sourc[ing] support for Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP) protests from around the globe using technology," and over 30,000 messages were received from over seventy countries. The use of the Internet allowed many people, both with and without personal ties to Hong Kong, to feel part of the movement; of the people personally connected to Hong Kong, many in fact emigrated *because of the very reasons that sparked the protests*, namely fear of the PRC tightening control and eroding democratic freedoms. I personally posted two messages onto the 'Add Oil' Machine website, and got to see one of them appear on a building as I watched a live-stream of the protest. I had not set foot in Hong Kong for over five years, yet I could see my name and my words physically amongst the hundreds of people I felt so much solidarity for in that moment. The messages also served the concrete purpose of lifting the spirits of those camping out at the protest sites, reminding them of how many were on their side while police used undue force to try to disperse them. Finally, the

indiscriminate use of tear gas on peaceful crowds. Demonstrators used umbrellas to shield themselves from the gas and water cannons, and the umbrella became a symbol of their passive resistance.

'Add Oil' Machine as a whole also functioned as a piece of installation art, and in fact it received the first prize at the 2015 Freedom Flowers Foundation Awards, given for artistic achievements in the area of human rights.

When Sau-ling Cynthia Wong wrote about cyberspace's potential function as a "denationalizer" in 2000 (125), it is difficult to say whether she had applications like the 'Add Oil' Machine in mind. As an award-winning artwork, perhaps even read as a collaborative poem-work, the 'Add Oil' Machine amplifies many of the themes and techniques that are so important to the pre-digital Hong Kong diasporic poetry analyzed in chapter one. Like *Atlas*, the Machine projects an alternative topography of language overtop of the existing landscape, but it does so literally, through technology. Like "From the *Diction Air*," the polylingualism of diaspora is drawn to the fore, not through the ludic language play of one writer but through the multiplicity of global interactive participants. Leung Ping-kwan's poems speak of how the people "have to buy the lot, including the useless pieces" (93) and ask "How to go about tailoring something new, to make it so it wears the body well?"(85). The question of how to make something of your own when an outside authority dictates what materials you must accept remains as prescient as ever before in the post-Umbrella Movement era, but the 'Add Oil' Machine demonstrates that the socio-technological means available for use on those materials have changed.

Despite its specificity, on one level, to the locality of Hong Kong, the Umbrella Movement is very connected to the Hong Kong diaspora. Chapter one of this dissertation goes deeply into the details behind why diaspora is such a large part of Hong Kong identity. The Umbrella Movement's importance to the diaspora can be seen in Member of Parliament for Vancouver East Jenny Kwan's official statement on the imprisonment of Umbrella Movement leaders, published in the Vancouver weekly newspaper *The Georgia Straight*. A Canadian MP

issuing a statement referencing her birth in Hong Kong, her interpretation of the original 1997 handover agreement as intending "the goal of reaching a democratic system for Hong Kong," her support of the Umbrella Movement as a peaceful effort toward that goal, and her staunch opposition to the jail sentences of the leaders shows the scope of the Umbrella Movement's reach throughout the global Hong Kong diaspora. So too does the screening of the 2016 documentary about the movement, "Yellowing" (directed by Hong Kong native and Umbrella Movement participant Chan Tze-woon), at the Vancouver International Film Festival, the Jihlava International Documentary Festival in the Czech Republic, and the Taiwan International Documentary Festival. "Yellowing" was even nominated for the prestigious Golden Horse Awards in Taipei. All this, in spite of the documentary being denied screen time at mainstream cinemas in Hong Kong, in what Chan believes is a move of encroaching self-censorship as businesses seek not to offend Beijing (Cheung, Chow).

Vancouver filmmaker Geoff Webb, writing for the Vancouver International Film Festival, states that "[t]o experience the 79 days of protest through Chan Tze-woon's eyes is to understand what it is to be truly powerless, and yet exhilarated and emboldened by the resilience of those around you." The diasporic readings of Dung, Leung, and ismail from chapter one continue to be pertinent to new works of documentary and multimedia art in Hong Kong today. Turning away from nationalism rooted in land control and state recognition—a kind of denationalization, in Wong's terms—to reinforcing community through a shared imaginary Hong Kong persists as a technique of resistance for the "truly powerless." This reading also further challenges the most common definition of efficacy by which hashtag activism is judged, since by that metric the Umbrella Movement failed to achieve any governmental or legal changes as of now, and indeed some of its leaders were sent to jail in 2017.

Besides the artistic success of several projects connected to the Umbrella Movement, the use of social media during the movement also achieved longer-term effects. Francis L.F. Lee's study of the common understanding of civil disobedience by the average Hong Konger finds that although instances of civil disobedience have historically occurred in Hong Kong for decades, "the practice was not well established in the society's repertoire of contentious actions" until the Umbrella Movement, when "the concept of civil disobedience was intensively discussed and debated" (393). Through quantitative analysis of data gathered in two telephone surveys conducted by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, one in September 2013 and one in October 2014, Lee finds that public understanding of civil disobedience increased significantly over the year. After the advent of the Umbrella Movement, "attitudinal support for and actual participation in the movement, the political use of social media, and discussions with disagreeing others significantly predicted the understanding of civil disobedience" (393). The target respondents of both surveys were randomized and weighted so that the samples matched the Hong Kong population in age, sex, and education; "the increase in understanding [of civil disobedience] between 2013 and 2014 was the most conspicuous among young people" (402). Lee's conclusions about social media use vs. mainstream media news are particularly relevant to the interests of this chapter: he finds that "the consumption of mainstream news did not lead to understanding of civil disobedience" because traditional media "failed to constitute a major channel through which the majority of the people could gain an understanding of civil disobedience," but in direct contrast "the political use of (but not sheer amount of time spent on) social media contributed substantially to the understanding of civil disobedience" (406). He attributes this effect not only to the fact that pro-movement views are more widely available on digital platforms, but also to the "high degree of

interactivity" of social media, "which can be particularly important in the uptake of conceptual, instead of merely factual, knowledge" (406).

Lee's findings are supported by another study done by Kwong Ying-Ho, in which he finds that "most mainstream media organisations took an anti-movement stance and practise self-censorship so as not to offend the Chinese government" and as a result many Hong Kongers turned to the Internet instead, where "online media have created an alternative political space attracting critically minded and democratic-oriented Hong Kong citizens" (273). Kwong observes that 66.49% of mainstream newspapers tended to condemn the movement (282) and that television stations also tended to 'harmonise' their views with the consensus of the Chinese government (284). In this media environment, he finds that "nearly all of the online media recorded considerable increases in terms of the number of [Facebook] 'Likes'" over the course of the Umbrella Movement, with for example the *Passion Times* having around 60,000 'Likes' before the movement and reaching more than 286,000 after, a growth rate of over 375% (286). Kwong attributes this turn to alternative online media to three factors: dissatisfaction with the perceived self-censorship of mainstream media, "the need for rapid information delivery" because "the Umbrella Movement was an unprecedented incident [and] many people needed to keep updated on the latest information," and the function of online platforms as a space for alternative perspectives (287-8).

Kwong's three factors as well as the high degree of interactivity identified by Lee were also at play in my own experience of an online community response to an unfolding public event, in the form of a collaborative poem-work hosted on the Web platform Tumblr. This personal example involves *much* lower political stakes than the Umbrella Movement, and I segue into it not to equate the two in scope. Rather, I am showing another application of an Internet

political and artistic activity that unites a diasporic community through cyberspace, thereby showing that certain aspects of digital solidarity are not just specific to unique geopolitical events but can be considered and theorized more broadly.

The 2015 edition of the annual *Best American Poetry (BAP)* anthology, guest edited by Sherman Alexie, sparked controversy when readers began to take notice of the biography of "The Bees, the Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers, Poseidon, Adam and Eve" contributor Yi-Fen Chou. The biography begins by stating that "Yi-Fen Chou is the pen name of Michael Derrick Hudson"; further in this biography, Hudson himself writes, "There is a very short answer for my use of a nom de plume: after a poem of mine has been rejected a multitude of times under my real name, I put Yi-Fen's name on it and send it out again. As a strategy for 'placing' poems this has been quite successful for me" (167). He goes on to claim that the very poem that appears in *BAP 2015* "was rejected under my real name forty (40) times before I sent it out as Yi-Fen Chou (I kept detailed submission records). As Yi-Fen the poem was rejected nine (9) times" (167). Alexie explained that he only found out about Hudson's true identity after he had already chosen the poem for the anthology, but decided to still include both the poem and pseudonym after he discovered the deception because he did not want to jettison them for his own mistake of "racial nepotism," of being "a brown-skinned poet who gave a better chance to another supposed brown-skinned poet because of our brownness" ("Sherman Alexie Speaks Out"). The combination of Hudson's and Alexie's justifications led other poets to speak out for and against their actions, bringing debates over identity politics and the subjective nature of poetic quality into mainstream media, which usually ignores all but the most famous of poetry news. *The New York Times*, for example, dedicated several articles to the unfolding drama, and their roundup of various scholars' and bloggers' responses ("A White Poet Borrows a Chinese Name and Sets Off Fireworks")

reveals the anxieties that poets of colour face about tokenization and dismissal of their merits based on perceived diversity quotas.

Like the findings from the Umbrella Movement, it is online media that gives voice to more diverse perspectives. The alternative viewpoints quoted in *The New York Times* largely come from online sources such as Twitter, BuzzFeed, and major women's interest blog Jezebel. While conversations about race and the literary institution at large are certainly worth having on a major mainstream stage, social media and independent websites also allow smaller, more personal reactions to proliferate. It was in this context that The Collected Poems of YFC was born. The idea was first initiated by Timothy Yu in a conversation about what to do with the sheer frustration we felt over the still-unfolding events. I jokingly suggested a Tumblr blog where we might continue to post other things a fictional Yi-Fen Chou has written. The inception of the project was largely a series of spontaneous and contingent decisions: we picked Tumblr because it was the most highly customizable platform that I was familiar with using, and we formed a group of Asian North American poets to work together with us because we knew them and we felt that there we be something in common among the reactions of these Asian poets we knew. Our frustrations, though unique in their own ways to each poet, seemed to hit nuances not yet covered by what others were saying: less focus on arguments about meritocracy and diversity, and more on gut reactions to the instrumentalization of Asianness as such based on our experiences as poets of the Asian diaspora.

This feeling of distaste, or hurt, sharpened when it was revealed that Yi-Fen Chou was not a random pseudonym, but was in fact the real name of a woman Hudson went to high school with, who wanted Hudson to stop appropriating her name.³¹ Similar to Kwong's analysis, the

³¹ See "Family Protests White Poet's Use of Chinese Pen Name" in *ArtsBeat: New York Times Blog*. Note that the Collected Poems of YFC project reached out to the Chou family and obtained permission from her sister to use the

rapid response time of the Internet in ongoing situations made it sensible to use as a medium and a place of virtual community to collectively react as new information continued to come to light. Sueyeun Juliette Lee, a poet who got involved in the Collected Poems of YFC Tumblr from the beginning, summarized her motivation for initially getting involved and her experience of the project thusly when she took leave of the group Facebook chat: "I feel satisfied with the level of ridicule/criticism that I was able to lobby at MDH through this site and am grateful for the ways everyone shared/sharpened my thoughts on this. [...] It was important for me to creatively vent and also support our community this way." The end product of the project was a collection of creative responses exploring cultural appropriation, growing up Asian in North America, orientalism and exoticization, but there was also value in how the process of the project gave participants a chance to come together in virtual co-presence. A group of people in various cities throughout Canada and the US were connected through the shared experience of being poets in a diasporic community directly implicated and impacted by the claims of 'reverse racism' made by a poet belonging to the cultural majority, and simultaneous action was made possible through conversations accommodated by social media and publications hosted on a centralized website. The Internet works so well for instances of group response to one single event like this, because it is both a channel for communication and a platform for expression at the same time. Whether concrete sustained change beyond raising awareness is possible through collaborative online art communities remains to be seen, but they demonstrably fulfill a need for immediate, of-the-moment response as well as short-term organizing.

Yi-Fen Chou name for the artistic and political purpose of critically responding to this incident. I will go into more detail about this process later in this chapter.

B) From Creator and Reader to Creator/Reader: Formal Experimentation and Collaboration Online

Through interactivity, a text turns a reader into an active participant, a collaborator in the work. Interactive forms of creation and consumption have been central to this dissertation, from the interactive translation process in the English and Cantonese works of Leung Ping-kwan, to the intensive personal and intertextual engagement demanded by works like *Dictée* and *Excerpts from: ΔIKTH / DIKTE, for DICTEE (1982)*, to the collaborative ideals driving projects such as the *Jamelie-Jamila Project*, *Circulars*, and *SwiftCurrent*. Collaboration is important to experimental expression for writers of the Asian diaspora explored in this dissertation because of how it subverts hierarchies and how it rethinks who has the authority to speak, to control language, to form a group, to intimately relate to others. The onset of Web 2.0 and social media fundamentally increased the feasibility and scope of interactive design, and in this section I explore Project Rebuild and The Collected Works of YFC, two examples of Internet-based collaborative poem-works that significantly blur the line between creator and reader.

Rosenfeld et al.'s *Information Architecture for the Web and Beyond* is a popular textbook in North American university web design classes. Their conception of what they call "information spaces" coalesce around the metaphor of architecture. They define the term "information architecture" as "the synthesis of organization, labeling, search, and navigation systems" within a website geared toward "support[ing] usability, findability, and understanding" (24); information architecture is also in itself "an emerging discipline and community of practice focused on bringing principles of design and architecture to the digital landscape" (24). Usability and 'findability' are emphasized as essential values throughout the book. The writers assert that the principles of information architecture are not restricted simply to indices, search engines, and

other features that directly help users find information on a website—rather, "information architecture starts with users and the reason they come to a site in the first place: they have an information need" (63). But this assertion's failure to account for the significant Web practice of aimless surfing goes to show that dominant forms are forced onto a medium that harbours much more potential. Artistic, non-directional websites like Sachiko Murakami's poetic Project Rebuild perform an Internet poetics that runs against the dominant grammar of the Internet as enforced by web design authorities.

By claiming that users always "seek" something from a site, Rosenfeld et al. discount the possibility of a cyberspatial *dérive*, in the Guy Debordian sense of a playful passage through rapidly varying environments, guided only by spontaneous attraction rather than an established motive.³² Link-hoppers often find themselves on virtual *dérives*, drawn by whatever link happens to catch their attention and creating their own unguided 'path' through cyberspace. College and university textbooks (of which the Rosenfeld et al. text is a typical rather than a unique case) teach web designers, despite their everyday experiences of the contrary, that Internet users prefer goal-oriented practices reminiscent of those valued by capitalistic business, and these web designers are then employed to produce websites. This trend toward corporatisation of the Internet effectively floods cyberspace with websites based on the same basic principles that do not reflect the myriad ways users flout them through common practice. Even personal blogs and other sites of non-professional self-expression are popularly based on templates that include search, keyword, and tagging functions designed to give the imagined user ways to find what

³² Guy Debord, founder of radical theory groups Letterist International and Situationist International, wrote "Theory of the Dérive" in 1956. He defines the *dérive* as an unplanned wander through a landscape, usually urban, in which participants drop their established relations and "let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (2). For the Situationists, the *dérive* is a revolutionary technique that combats the goal-oriented efficiency and commoditization promoted by modern society.

they must be looking for. By refusing to provide such functions, or providing them with unexpected twists, Murakami uses Project Rebuild to show how the Internet can be used poetically to unsettle hierarchies, through both its form and its collaborative properties.

Like *Information Architecture for the Web and Beyond*, Project Rebuild is built upon architecture metaphors. Project Rebuild is an online complement to Murakami's 2011 poetry collection, *Rebuild*. The scholar Joanne Leow goes as far as to call Project Rebuild a "part of the publicity for *Rebuild*" (150), but I would strongly argue that as an experimental online collaborative poem-work, Project Rebuild has become an independent poetry project in its own right, especially considering the scale of participation and growth that it has reached since its inception. It continues to grow as a website, and uses an interactive form and aesthetic that is unique to its nature as virtual rather than print text. For these reasons, it needs to be read and interpreted differently from *Rebuild*, and for the purposes of this dissertation I focus specifically on Project Rebuild as a work of its own, not as an extension of *Rebuild*.

Project Rebuild began with a single poem, also published in *Rebuild*, called "Vancouver Special," about the eponymous single-unit housing design unique to Vancouver. Murakami then "renovated" this poem by running it "through Google Translate and back again through four languages of people [she has] known who have lived in Vancouver Specials—Cantonese, Italian, Portuguese and Serbian—and back to English again" ("About"). The resulting, subtly different texts were sent out to thirteen poets whom Murakami knew, many of them Vancouver-based, including Ray Hsu, Larissa Lai, Meredith Quartermain, Nikki Reimer, and Rita Wong. These poets, listed as "the first residents of the neighbourhood" ("About"), renovated Murakami's translated poems and in turn their poems were put onto the website as to be renovated. These poems were housed in thirteen subtly different clickable illustrations of a Vancouver Special, one

poem in each house. Visitors to the website are invited to click on any house at will and "move in" to the poem within. Clicking on the "renovate" option then puts the poem into an editable textbox, where the user can produce a new text of his or her own, and submitting that text adds a new Vancouver Special illustration (a seemingly random one chosen from the original thirteen) onto the front page. As more users read, write, and collaborate, more Vancouver Specials proliferate for future users to renovate. There is no vetting of submissions. As Murakami clearly states, the idea of the project is "to challenge the notion that the poems we write belong to us, that we are anything but temporary residents in the tenement house. Poetry is a community project in which we are all participants" ("About").

Leow argues that the collaborative innovations of the project work as "a crucial lens through which to view capitalist spaces of intentional abstraction and repetition," in that Project Rebuild explicitly and implicitly deals with "Vancouver's globalized cityscape" in both content and form (139). Murakami's Japanese heritage and self-awareness of Vancouver as a colonized city contribute to this exploration of "the implications of living in an Asian North American city that has yet to come to terms with the genealogies of its lands and communities, and its contemporary role as a prototype of capitalist urbanism" (139). In Leow's reading, collaboration becomes the antidote to the profit- and ownership-obsessed nature of Vancouver's property market, as it "seek[s] instead to recapture the participatory aspects of producing a social urban space, complete with its vulnerability to any kind of alteration or erasure" (151). Collaboration is arguably a formal feature of Project Rebuild as a poem-work, not just a feature of its delivery vehicle. Anyone who engages with the poetic renovations is a kind of collaborator, whether they are just casually browsing through or adding new poems, and is led to reflect on the temporariness of both words and the spaces they symbolize. The instability of these poems is

foregrounded by their presentation: every time you click into a house, you do not know which poem will appear, and it appears not just by itself but with its "previous tenants" and "renovations" linked to it. There is no way to read any part of Project Rebuild without participating in some way in its collective nature. Leow connects the instability of the poems built in by Murakami's formal choices as the primary creator and her "impulse toward online collaborative poetry making" to a larger desire to "unsettle the breathless acceptance of the rapid movements of global capital and the uncanny duplication of urban space by repeatedly challenging this abstract space, reminding us constantly of the reality of the human bodies that inhabit it" (151).

The accelerated urban capitalist space of Vancouver is reminiscent of Hong Kong, a city so conceptually similar to Vancouver in so many ways. Astute readers may have already noticed the recurring presence of Vancouver hovering in the background of chapter one, as Vancouver has a strong link to the Hong Kong diaspora—so much so that "Hongcouver" is a (sometimes loving, sometimes derogatory) nickname for Vancouver. The real estate and private property market of Vancouver is also an issue very much tied up with racialization and the Asian diaspora, which I will engage with in more depth later in this section. The Hong Kong diasporic poets analysed in chapter one of this dissertation also arguably worked to unsettle the acceptance of that rapidly changing and duplicating urban landscape and to remind readers of the humanity behind the commoditization of the city. Leung's poetry uses figurative, literal, and formal echoes to disrupt the future-facing time of Hong Kong's linear development with memories of the past; Dung's *Atlas* puns, mythologizes, and calls into question the provenance of official street names to juxtapose them with what the people actually call places; and ismail does the same with not only place names but all names, the words we use to call things in English. In Project Rebuild,

Murakami takes on a similar task of destabilizing accepted ideas of how the city of Vancouver is oriented, who owns the city, and whose words are used to speak the city. However, tools Murakami uses are not only textual, but also interactive features made possible by the electronic digital medium.

Another scholar, Emily Ballantyne, goes further into how Project Rebuild's interactive form not only contends with living in a capitalist space, but also enacts anti-hegemonic politics. If we agree with the assertions of spatial theorists like Henri Lefebvre that spaces are socially constructed and imbricated in power relations, "a means of production" and "also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it" (Lefebvre 26), then Murakami's vision of space as a virtual communal practice rather than a concrete site of ownership flouts the domination of power. Ballantyne phrases it as a relinquishing of "all control of her work when she places her poems on the rental market," resulting in a denial of "a stable definition of ownership over language" (188). She observes that the poems in Project Rebuild "renovate space and simultaneously extend the definition of poetry, pushing its limits to include multiple competing forms at the same time that it creates the conditions for multiple viewpoints and responses to the project itself" (191-2). These multiple forms include things as varied as traditional rhyming couplets, concrete poems, a video poem by Ray Hsu, textual commentary and responses, and ASCII art of houses by Darren Wershler-Henry.³³ One poem, by someone who has chosen the username "Just a student," likely from a university class asked to engage with Project Rebuild as an assignment, asks the reader "When you pay so much to learn and dream / should something not be more practical?" A project

³³ ASCII, or the American Standard Code for Information Interchange, is a code that represents text in computers and other textual display devices. ASCII art is the production of pictures through the use of the 95 printable characters in ASCII. The characters are put together to visually build a composite picture, rather than read for sense. A common and simplistic example of ASCII art is emoticons.

is truly anti-hierarchical when it has embedded within itself the ability to participate through critiquing it.

Ballantyne further points out that Murakami was part of the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW)—of which Fred Wah was also an influential part—and that it was an environment that "facilitated her development as a community-oriented poet with a highly politicized poetics" (180). The KSW defines its communal identity as not a shared aesthetic but rather a shared "politicized understanding of how art and literary production often contributed to the ruling class's hegemonic influence over society," and an investment in turning this influence on its head by using art and literary production as vehicles of resistance instead (180-1). In this context, Project Rebuild's invitation to collaborate can be understood as an explicit rejection of the authority of the one single author, and its interactive form overall runs against the hegemony of the literary production industry. Murakami herself states, in an interview with Natalie Zina Walschots, that Project Rebuild is "an unedited anthology, but one that is constantly being edited by the participants every time they respond"; the project is therefore a "diversion from the idea of anthology, which is exclusive and collected with singular vision." Project Rebuild also subverts the finality of an exclusive, edited anthology by remaining open to new participants. Ballantyne calls this a "community-based poetic model" that is "invested in creating alternative discourses that bring to light the limitations of so-called totalizing systems of power," which "creates an important counterdiscourse based in dialectic and polyphony" (Ballantyne 189). This polyphonic model echoes the aspirations of *SwiftCurrent*'s founding editors in the 1980s in that it also aspired to be an unedited anthology, as discussed in chapter three, but Project Rebuild takes away many more of the constraints built into *SwiftCurrent* and is more inclusive of anyone who

wants to participate. In addition, advancements in Internet and social networking technologies allow Project Rebuild to reach a much wider pool of collaborators.

Not only does Project Rebuild subvert hierarchical structures in traditional publishing, it also subverts commonly held rules in Web publishing, defying the dominant grammar of a model website as explained by Rosenfeld et al. It is worth poetically reading these non-semantic features of Project Rebuild as a collaborative poem-work to take notice of how it goes about doing so. Not only is there no search function to find or re-find a specific poem on the site, there are even several features designed to make deliberate searches more difficult. The order of houses on the front page changes every time it refreshes—unlike physical houses, they have no permanent street addresses, and unlike physical book collections the reader is forced to read a new poem every time he or she does the equivalent of flipping to the same page. It is also very easy to lose one's way on Project Rebuild, as there are no labels or names on any of the Vancouver Specials and poets' names, where given, are only shown when the cursor hovers over a house. I have the first-hand experience of reading a poem by Fred Wah, forgetting to save the URL before clicking through to a few renovations, then losing track of which "previous tenant" I had come from, and then spending half an hour clicking likely links (and therefore reading a few more new poems) looking for the same Wah poem before I found it again.

The touchstone of Web searchability has largely been set by Google, to the extent that "to Google something" has now become a proprietary eponym for "to look up something" in our current English. But Google's search algorithms take the user's geographical location, personal Web history, and previous search queries into account, so that different users often return vastly different results for the exact same search term. Even when appropriated as a tool for producing

poetry, such as the in the practice of Flarf poetry,³⁴ search engines have a way of accumulating sediments of meaning, which build up differently depending on the situated user. While the Internet may facilitate subversions of traditional forms through the introduction of new ways to generate poetic meaning, it also introduces new restrictions to how much a subject can step outside of their own position and examine it critically. Subversive approaches also run up against the economic interests of commercial programmers and advertisers. Even Murakami began Project Rebuild by using Google, specifically its translation tool to translate her "Vancouver Special" poem into Cantonese, Italian, Portuguese, Serbian, and back into English again. Murakami gives away her authority as the initial creator, but she gives it to a computerized system developed by an aggressively capitalistic corporation, which Ballantyne points out is also displacing the work of human translators. While "Murakami's procedures deny the stability of language ownership, " it is at the same time "rearticulating neoliberalism by using the tools it provides" (186). This sometimes complicit relationship is further complicated by Project Rebuild's in-built capacity for critiquing itself from the inside.

For example, Ray Hsu's untitled piece renovates Murakami's "Vancouver Special" into a YouTube video of Vancouver 2010 Olympics news coverage dubbed over with a robotic voice reading "Vancouver Special" out loud. In a telephone interview I conducted with Hsu, one of the "first residents" of the Project Rebuild neighbourhood, he explains how he, like Flarf practitioners, also used the subversion of an Internet search tool to create his piece. He input the entire text of "Vancouver Special" into the search bar of YouTube, which he says he remembers

³⁴ An avant-garde poetry practice that mines the results of odd search terms on Internet search engine, and uses those results to create a kind of found poetry with intentionally funny, inappropriate, and/or vulgar content. For further reading, see Gary Sullivan's "A Brief Guide to Flarf Poetry" (<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-flarf-poetry>), *Jacket2's* special feature on "What was Flarf?" (<http://jacket2.org/commentary/what-was-flarf>), and *Flarf: An Anthology of Flarf* (2017) edited by Drew Gardner, Nada Gordon, K. Silem Mohammad, Gary Sullivan, and Sharon Mesmer.

reading was the third or fourth most used search engine on the Internet at the time. He then selected the first result that the search returned: a human interest story on Chinese figure skating pair Shen Xue and Zhao Hongbo, likely circulating as a popular video at the time because of the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. Hsu calls it "an interesting confluence of the Olympics and nationalism and commentary on Vancouver housing," at a time when there was a heightened level of activism regarding the displacement of homeless people and the use of unceded First Nations lands by Olympic infrastructure. His piece, which pitches together images of financially successful Chinese athletes and an emotionless voice expressing concerns about the affordability of housing, also brings to mind the complex interplay of attitudes in Vancouver toward those perceived as part of the recent influx of nouveau riche Asian immigrants versus those who have been part of Vancouver's local history since the building of the historic Chinatown. In this way, an increasingly commercialized hosting site, YouTube, is commandeered to make an artistic and political statement, not just through content but also through its very function as a searchable host. Given that profit generation on YouTube is largely accomplished through advertisements run through Google AdSense, and that search results are ranked based not only on matching titles and keywords but also on how popular the video is and how many interactions it produces, Hsu's deliberate misuse of the search function and his creation of a video that attracts traffic almost exclusively from another website disrupts the corporation's intended path streamlined through extensive, careful market research. Much as the contents of Project Rebuild redirect and creatively re-imagine the poem form, the concept of the Project Rebuild website acts as a catalyst for redirections and creative re-imaginings of the ubiquitous Internet search function, in a sort of ripple effect that radiates outward into other websites.

While putting the words of "Vancouver Special" into the mouths of Chinese figure

skaters, Hsu kept in mind that "when we're talking about housing we're also talking about race" (telephone interview). The connection between racialisation and housing is emphasised by how Project Rebuild revolves around the central image of Vancouver Specials, a racially loaded architectural style.³⁵ The large, efficiently-designed and aesthetically unpretentious units invading neighbourhoods previously populated exclusively by mock Tudor, Craftsman, and West Coast Modern style houses were seen as the physical manifestation of immigrant waves also invading the neighbourhood. According to a brochure put out by the Vancouver Heritage Foundation for their Vancouver Special architectural tour,

In 1968, 44 percent of international immigrants to British Columbia came from Europe and 22 percent came from Asia. But by 1988, 66 percent came from Asia and only 17 percent from Europe. As a result, many Vancouver Specials in the 1970s were being built and bought by South East Asian and Chinese immigrants. During the heyday of their construction, Vancouver Specials were criticized as monotonous, flat-fronted boxes that were seen to take over neighbourhoods in an intimidating manner.

More recently, property market trends in Vancouver have changed towards foreign investment by wealthy non-residents from China and the Middle East. Eveline Xia, who immigrated to Canada from China as a young child, began the Twitter hashtag #DontHave1million to draw a line in the sand between "average, hardworking Canadian residents" and "the global wealthy," and to clearly place herself on the former side of the line (Gordon). The hashtag went viral as

³⁵ To be clear, when talking about Vancouver Specials, both Murakami and the Vancouver Heritage Foundation brochure refer to specific types of houses built primarily from 1965-85, are characterized by their functional, box-like designs and similar floor plans that could legally house secondary tenants such as extended family or renters. Owners of Vancouver Specials were often stereotyped as 'hardworking immigrants.' In the late 1980s and 90s, Vancouver Specials evolved into larger 'monster homes' and pre-fab mansions as Asian immigrants began to trend toward increasing affluence.

many other Vancouverites used it to express their anger and frustration about their inability to afford a home in the skyrocketing housing market. Xia's move shows the ambivalence within the Chinese diasporic community in Vancouver, as it must deal with both xenophobia from non-Asian residents and its own sense of differentiation from those it sees as part of an international elite rather than a diaspora. The issue of contention is not so much that the ultra-rich are immigrating to Canada, but that "they continue to earn the vast bulk of their wealth outside of Canada and they use that wealth to invest in Vancouver real estate. As a result, housing prices have decoupled from the labour market, putting people who earn local wages at a major disadvantage," magnified by tax loopholes (Stiem). By pressing the government to track and regulate foreign property speculation, Xia and other members of the diaspora hope to benefit the class and local identities they are affiliated with but also curb the anti-Chinese sentiment that fall onto them regardless of how they personally identify.

Of course, the connection between racialization and property is not only relevant to the Asian diaspora. Rita Wong, a Vancouver poet also on the list of "first residents," explores the ties among class, race, and ecology in her renovation of Murakami's "Vancouver Special," also entitled "Vancouver Special." By asking "How much land allocated / to whom assigned? / & whom assassinated?", Wong recalls to mind the forceful removal of the real life first residents of the land in Vancouver: the Musqueam First Nation. Although there is no physical land at stake in cyberspace, the absence of Musqueam writers in the list of "first residents" is notable because of Project Rebuild's focus on critiquing property ownership in Vancouver. If Project Rebuild shows, as Ballantyne suggests, that "[w]hen the focus is on the fluid movement of exchange associated with renting a space only for a limited time, occupation overrides ownership as a primary way of understanding domestic and poetic environments" (178), then I argue that it is

worth thinking about the multiple meanings of "occupation" and about the fact that most Vancouver residents are settler-colonists on unceded territory. The idea that "[p]roperty and poetry are re-articulated based on social occupation and inhabiting a space, undermining the political value of private ownership as a concept that inhibits community" (Ballantyne 178) is particularly fruitful for a diasporic reading framework, but brings me back to the worry I expressed in chapter one that my theorization of diaspora can be used as an argument against indigeneity. I truly feel that they can be seen as concurrent struggles with many points of solidarity, rather than oppositional ideas, and though it would take me too far from the topic of my dissertation to think through it in detail I mention it again to re-emphasize the point.

In the case of Vancouver, the populations most vulnerable to displacement by investment capital in the poorest parts of the city are the First Nations and the elderly immigrants living in the connected Downtown East Side and Chinatown areas. Situating itself firmly in this context, Project Rebuild asks us to think about how subversive digital form, collaboration, anti-hegemony, and real estate as an approach to poetics can all contribute to sociality and community, to co-habitation not just in the literal physical sense. However, I argue that this context also means we must not disregard the real sense of occupation in that diaspora necessarily also means settling and occupying others' lands. If Project Rebuild develops "an architectural poetics of community, one that emphasizes rebuilding as a rhisomatic process that has the power to undermine and reimagine the concept of home and home ownership in Vancouver" (Ballantyne 178), it is worth thinking about how or whether this re-imagination can be both diasporic and decolonizing. Diasporic and indigenous poetics and are both about finding power in shared community, memory, and everyday experiences, beyond the caprices of state governments and what recognition they deign to grant. Collaborative poem-works such as

Project Rebuild are tapping into that through the idea of using collaboration to flatten certain hierarchies, or at least to express a desire to do so. They are using digital media to explore ways of doing so, in order to create more alternative visions of communities and how people within them can relate with each other.

Collaborative projects aimed at disrupting authority, however, are not the same as open sandboxes where any and all actions are allowable and equal. As the primary creator of the collaborative poem-work, Murakami still made executive decisions in designing the parameters of Project Rebuild, and hired Starkaður Barkarson to code the website. Barkarson's technological architecture still guides users through the site and limits how they can interact with the site—you may put input any text you like in the text box, for example, but the text box is your only point of insertion, and once your text has been entered it can no longer be edited or deleted by you, and a randomized house is chosen without your control. These larger framework decisions make the difference between a collaborative poem-work, as I define it, and other Internet activities. Furthermore, Murakami's approach to collaboration is not the only one—there are different types of collaboration that can still be motivated by similar ideals. *SwiftCurrent*, for example, had stricter guidelines about the content and was therefore mostly a collaboration between editors and literary and scholarly contributors, rather than all members of the public. The Collected Works of YFC had different levels of collaboration, amongst the main group working together to create it and then between that group and reader/contributors at large. Although the collaborative elements in The Collected Works of YFC manifested very differently from Project Rebuild, the two projects share an overarching interest in moving beyond singular voices and authoritarianism.

Within the primary Collected Works of YFC group of poets that shared a Facebook chat room, every project-wide decision was made by considering everybody's input. Each poet was free to make their own creative decisions about their individual contributions, but there was no single leader or final arbiter for decisions about the project as a whole. One example is the question of whether to stop or continue using Yi-Fen Chou's name after her family spoke out against Hudson's appropriation of it, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. The group decided through consensus to contact Chou's sister through email to ask for permission to use the name, and all agreed that we would stop usage if requested to do so. We also collaborated on the wording of the letter, as well as a statement on the "About" page that clarifies that "[t]his blog is authored by a group of Asian North American writers who are responding critically to Hudson's exploitation of an Asian American identity," and that "[o]ur writings are not in her voice, but rather are in solidarity with the right of all Asian voices to be heard on their own terms free of exploitation." The emphasis of both our letter and our statement was on the plurality of voices, as opposed to one person presuming the authority to take a voice for themselves. We proceeded with the project once we received a response from Chou's sister saying that it had her family's support. As we added more poets to the Tumblr, we agreed that we would also add everyone involved in the Tumblr to our Facebook chat, as we valued having a place for all of us to converse and work together. The process of adding new people was shared by all, as we voted on whether to add each new person and would not do so if anybody voted no. Paradoxically, this process can be seen as exclusionary, but it was a decision made to safeguard the password to the website and to prevent anyone from being forced to work with somebody they did not feel comfortable with, and so in a sense it was there to preserve the collaborative experience we had

already started building. There were still other ways for people to collaborate from outside the group.

Any reader browsing the Tumblr blog can participate through interaction in several ways. They can like a post, reblog it so that it becomes added to their own personal blog, add commentary so that anyone who sees their reblogged post will see their response as a part of the post, and/or send an ask, instant message, or submission to the blog. These functions are native to the Tumblr platform and we chose not to opt out of them. Somebody who self-identified with the name "Sam Cha" submitted a poem of their own, and the primary group thoroughly debated whether to publish it, with different poets citing various concerns regarding quality and consistency in our curated content, and accessibility vs. gatekeeping. After a long deliberation process in which anyone with a strong position either way stated their reasoning, we ultimately decided to publish the submission, pointing to how we prioritized community inclusiveness in our vision of the project. Another possible avenue of collaboration was with other artists and groups who were also responding to the Hudson incident at the time. Within our chat, we supported and collaborated with poets who were pursuing responses outside of the Tumblr, such as Kenji Liu sending a list of books by Asian American authors to the public library where Hudson worked as suggested holding purchases, or Ray Hsu's satirical internship application to the Asian American Writers Workshop as a commentary on internal politics within the Asian American literary scene. Writers in the group also connected us with people outside of the group who wanted to work together. One example of a partnership that we actually turned down was an opportunity to associate our project with Asian poets who acquired the web domain michaelderrickhudson.com. They envisioned a much more antagonistic, confrontational project, articulated to us in the form of a mission statement or manifesto. While we fully supported both

that approach and anyone from our group who wanted to participate, we decided The Collected Works of YFC as one discrete project of its own would not become a part of their proposition. Our main reasoning was not disagreement with their approach, but more that we valued a diversity of approaches and thought it was important for them to not be subsumed into each other. As Hsu put it, "it very important that any space I participate in has room for self and collective critique [...]. Anything where all contributors must fall in line to provide a united front would lose my interest. I think the mix [we] have here is valuable." Another similarity that The Collected Works of YFC shares with Project Rebuild, therefore, is the mindful accommodation of participation through self-critique.

This similarity in both projects ultimately points to a larger similarity in the intentions of these two collaborative poem-works. On the one hand, their aims are different from each other in that they raise awareness of, respond to, and invite deeper analysis of two completely different topical issues. On the other hand, they both use interactivity for the purpose of blurring the line between creator and reader in order to subvert the hegemony of the single, authoritative voice. This subversion is relevant to certain ongoing interests of experimental poets in the Asian diaspora, such as writing against dominant forms and grammars, interrogating language, forming and participating in community, and generating a sense of shared presence without shared physical land. It is therefore important to read these works not only as digital or electronic literature, but also as Asian diasporic literature, because that framework allows us to see the significance of those themes more clearly.

SECTION C: Political Community and New Digital Tools for the Poetic Toolbox

In 2010, the prominent Canadian national news magazine *Maclean's* published its annual *Maclean's Guide to Canadian Universities*, a ranking of Canadian universities based on a variety of factors in the undergraduate experience. Within this edition of the guide was an article by Nicholas Kohler and Stephanie Findlay titled "Too Asian: Some frosh don't want to study at an Asian university."³⁶ The article introduces two white high school graduates who opt not to attend top universities with a "reputation of being Asian," and explains that they are part of a growing number of students who are "eschewing some big-name schools over perceptions that they're 'too Asian'." Too Asian, according to the article, means a school that is overly focused on academics, at the expense of "social interaction, athletics and self-actualization." This article unsurprisingly attracted criticism and condemnation from a multitude of groups for its blithely uncomplimentary overgeneralizations of both Asian and white students, its unreflective use of abstract racial categories that encompass many different ethnicities and cultures, its lack of distinction between domestic and international students, and its frequent application of American anecdotal evidence to a Canadian situation. One particular response that stood out to me most at the time was not a newspaper op-ed, a published think piece, or a statement from an organization. Rather, it was a grassroots student response hosted on Tumblr, then a relatively new platform beginning to gain intense popularity amongst teen- and college-aged users.

The Tumblr, called Asians Not Studying (<http://asiansnotstudying.tumblr.com>) was by its own description "created by several students at McGill—apparently where all the 'White' kids go—in response to this asinine article from *Maclean's* Magazine." The blog gives inspiration credit to another Tumblr called Muslims Wearing Things, a blog created in response to former

³⁶ In response to the ensuing controversy, *Maclean's* changed the title of the article twice, first by adding a question mark to make the title "Too Asian? Some frosh [...]" and then by completely rewording it to "The enrollment controversy: Worries that efforts in the U.S. to limit enrollment of Asian students in top universities may migrate to Canada." Beyond these changes, however, the *Maclean's* never acknowledged or apologized for the commotion caused by the article.

NPR analyst Juan Williams' Islamophobic comments about 'Muslim garb' that showcases pictures of Muslims in a diverse variety of settings and garments to refute stereotypes about visually identifying Muslims. In a similar vein, Asians Not Studying collects and posts photos and videos of Asians doing a large variety of activities besides studying, as a tongue-in-cheek rejoinder to the idea that Asianness is somehow synonymous with too much focus on academics. This blog attracted me so much at the time because Tumblr offered such an easy medium for immediate reaction, letting those directly impacted by and implicated in the article to come together and respond in witty, engaging, eye-opening, and solidarity-building ways. Representatives from Chinese Canadian advocacy groups and universities had put out official statements against the *Maclean's* article, but this Tumblr felt much more direct. Anybody with access to the Internet could jump in, could browse it or reblog from it or respond to it. This spirit of open possibility is reminiscent of early cyber-utopians' beliefs that online communication is inherently emancipatory. In my view, there are far too many limits to Internet communication to support utopian claims (not the least of which, as already discussed, include limits to: access, engagement, creative control, independence, diversity of opinion, and of course the current hot-button issue of net neutrality). Yet this spirit is also what allows for the creation of the collaborative poem-works I analyze in this chapter.

The creators and contributors of *Circulars* (created in 2003) and *The Collected Poems of YFC* (created in late 2015) turned to the Web because of its suitability as both a medium for artistic exploration and as a virtual setting for communal gathering. In this section, I compare and contrast these two digital collaborative poem-works made twelve years apart, to examine the similarities and differences between what the two sets of participants wanted to and were able to achieve.

The artistic vision behind Stefans' conception of Circulars is itself rather circuitous. Stefans states in an interview with Giselle Beiguelman that "Circulars is not intended to be an artwork, at least in any strict sense (it's not a product or a performance)," but that it is artistic in its "verbal and visual choreography, its skewed relationship to fact, and that it was produced by several authors, rather than any individual piece of content" (250). The ostensible project of Circulars was to provide a central place for poets and artists to post about and discuss the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Stefans was particularly "interested in having the site be a place where poets could work out strategies of writing that were not necessarily 'poems'" (*Before* 270), and yet the site itself as a whole "can be conceptualized as somewhere between a 'poem' and a 'community'" (275). In comparison, The Collected Poems of YFC is also a centralized hub for poets to post responses to a specific event, this time the event of Michael Derrick Hudson's use of yellowface in *Best American Poetry 2015*. Like Circulars, the YFC Tumblr can be seen as a place for multiple poets to post an assortment of things, and yet it can also be taken together as a whole, as one large poem-work. In addition, though both are responses triggered by specific events, the content unsurprisingly broadens to include more general analysis of the philosophical, political, and socio-historical themes and ideas related to those events.

Beyond the vision behind Circulars, its artistic practice can be summarized by this list of categories from the Circulars archive: "activity reports," "announcement," "books" "circulars," "detournement," "direct actions," "events," "gothic news service," "humour," "interviews," "links," "mirakove relay," "music," "news stories," "open letters," "opinion," "poems," "poetics," "satire," "scott pound reports," "site news," "statements," "witness accounts," and "wtf?!". Of these categories, I can generalize them further into three overarching types of posts: reposts, serious discussions, and creative wit. Reposts includes anything that the contributor has

seen somewhere else and is posting again onto Circulars, usually for the purposes of inviting further discussion or raising awareness. Link dumps, event announcements, “mirakove relay,” and “scott pound reports”³⁷ all fall under the umbrella of reposts. Posts meant to incite serious discussions were usually tagged under categories such as “book,” “poetics,” “poems,” and “circulars,” which reflects the shared interests of the group. Stefans had chosen the term 'circulars' at the inception of the project to signify pieces that would take on their own life in being passed around to others—"a lofty dream, of course, but nonetheless the guiding principle behind the name of the site. None of the poems, so far as [Stefans] know[s], became huge hits as 'circulars'" (*Before* 273). Lastly, creatively witty posts involve some kind of political satire or political commentary-based humour, and include Stefans' “gothic news service” series (a macabre and absurdist fantasy in the style of Associated Press news bulletins, full of thinly-veiled critiques of Bush's policies), and “detournement” (containing commercial and political works that have been hijacked, remixed, and culture-jammed, as befitting the Guy Debord reference of its name). The reposts are by far the most numerous entries, likely because they are the lowest effort posts.

In contrast, the YFC Tumblr does not have an equivalent organizational system for entries, since we used tags for reaching a wider audience rather than for sorting posts.³⁸ However, by looking at all of the posts, I can see that these three basic groupings also apply. Reposts were made through both the reblog function as well as posting news links; a few posts meant for more serious discussion and for furthering conversation were made; and there were

³⁷ The Mirakove Relay was a series of email newsletters by poet Carol Mirakove, full of links to substantial articles and essays, that Stefans reposted in full to Circulars. Similarly, Stefans also reposted Scott Pound's running diary of his time in Turkey, originally posted to the Buffalo Poetics List.

³⁸ Tumblr's tagging system is such that the first five tags of every post is searchable by any user, and will also show the post to users following a particular tag, so the judicious use of popular or specific tags can lead to reaching a wider audience.

many posts showing creative wit. A key difference is in the proportions of these posts. Unlike Circulars, reposts were the least of the entries on the YFC Tumblr, and posts with creative wit content were the overwhelming majority. One key explanation for this difference is that funny memes and humorous remix parodies are the dominant language of Tumblr. *Asians Not Studying* was created seven years after *Circulars*, and *The Collected Works of YFC* was created about six years after *Asians Not Studying*, yet *Asians Not Studying* is much more similar in feel to *The Collected Works of YFC* than to *Circulars*. Obviously both *Asians Not Studying* and *The Collected Works of YFC* use the same platform, but the existence of the Tumblr platform itself speaks to a shift in Internet usage in the age of social media.

More than ever before, the Internet now deals largely in pithy, shareable, remixable, usually funny content, often in the form of memes. The term 'meme' was first coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 to mean "small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation," but in the age of the Internet has come to mean "the propagation of items such as jokes, rumors, videos, and websites from person to person" through their "sparking of user-created derivatives" (Shifman 2). Communications scholar Limor Shifman points out that Internet memes are different from viral content because they are fundamentally intertextual and interactive. Rather than just being popularly passed from person to person, memes encourage imitation and contribution, such that they have become a "new arena of bottom-up expression [that] can blend pop culture, politics, and participation in unexpected ways" (4). Even in 2003, before the discourse of Internet memes became commonplace, Stefans realized that the popularity of *détournements* on *Circulars* had more social significance than just mere fun. "Appropriation, with its hint of criminality, was one surprisingly popular means" of engagement for poets, and he states that "the torrent of 'remixes' and *détournements* that ensued leading up to

the war put center stage a seething but as yet underground culture" (*Before* 284). Stefans identifies this interest in appropriation as part of a larger interest in critiquing how intellectual property and indeed property at all was concentrated in the hands of a powerful minority, and he writes that "this angle on property and how it can be recombined into new cultural products could be a key aspect of a new shared sensibility" (284). This sensibility can also be seen in Project Rebuild's critical engagement with urban property, or *SwiftCurrent*'s exploration of dismantling hierarchies in intellectual property, but works like *Excerpts from ΔIKTH/DIKTE for DICTEE* (1982), *Dictée*, and the pieces by ismail definitely also share an interest in taking what was once owned by somebody else and recombining it into new cultural products. Rather than calling it a "new shared sensibility," I suggest that what Stefans calls "a seething but [at the time of 2003 an] underground culture" had actually been seething for far longer. Much as I argued in chapter three that technological advances did not create a completely new desire for poetic experimentation with interactivity, but rather facilitate an existing desire in new and heightened ways, so it is with the desire to remix and appropriate. A poetic reading of the memetic and remixing culture demonstrated in *Circulars* and *The Collected Works of YFC* reveals not something brand new but rather something intensified by new media.

Some détournements—or 'proto-memes'—posted onto *Circulars* include visual remixes such as "The Triumph of Corporate Monoculture," which takes the iconic "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" photograph depicting US Marines planting an American flag during WWII and replaces the flag with an Arabic McDonald's sign being raised instead. Others involve wordplay, and even a remix of the nursery rhyme "Sing a Song of Sixpence" turned into "Sing a Song of Esso" that indicts governmental policies driven by the pursuit of oil money. These works exemplify Shifman's claim that "While memes are seemingly trivial and mundane artifacts, they

actually reflect deep social and cultural structures" (15). Shifman also suggests that while memes are certainly part contemporary digital culture's overall bent towards disassembling intellectual property, more significantly they have also become "highly valued pillars of the so-called *participatory culture*" (4). The spread of memes is associated with what Nicholas A. John has identified as the constitutive activity of Web 2.0: sharing.³⁹

As we move from *Circulars* in 2003 toward *Asians Not Studying* and into *The Collected Works of YFC*, the increasing popularity of meme culture gains more implications for the creation of virtual and real community. Imitation and remixing play foundational roles in memes. While all parody involves some kind of imitation in its critique of the source text, in the specific context of memes the parody "targets both the ideological and communicative aspects of the original meme" (Shifman 48)—that is, not only the idea content of the source but also the form and medium by which it is conveyed. Popular poems posted to *The Collected Works of YFC* remix existing poems, and do indeed aim to parody multiple aspects. For example, the remix of Wallace Stevens' haiku-inflected "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" into "13 ways of looking at an asian" brings the Modernists' fascination with East Asian aesthetics together with the Hudson affair:

V

I do not know which to prefer,

The taste of racial farces

Or the taste of dramatic irony

The pseudonym or the real name revealed

Just after.

³⁹ See John, Nicholas A. *The Age of Sharing*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016. Print.

Several of Hudson's own poems are also remixed into ones that address the very situation that made them briefly notorious. The parodies on the YFC Tumblr expand upon the consideration of property in capitalism by adding the sometimes self-contradictory idea of cultural property to the mix. The YFC remixes and memes bring up questions beyond whether something belongs to just one or all: they ask how the ways in which you do and do not own something may differ with cultural privilege, what may belong to one community and not to another, how the different senses of appropriation can interconnect.

Besides poetry remixes, The Collected Works of YFC also feature images more recognizable as memes, such as stock character macros and advice animals. Macros are common visual memes that feature a funny message or catchphrase in large block font printed across a picture. A large assortment of "Actual Asian Poet" macros were posted to the YFC Tumblr, each featuring an individual Asian diasporic poet with a link to further information about that poet beneath the image. In the context of the poem-work as a whole, these macros are obliquely criticize Hudson for being a fake Asian poet when not enough attention is paid to actual Asian poets, but as standalones they also just sincerely educational. Other memes are not necessarily educational: one iteration of a doge meme (a ubiquitous Internet meme since its debut circa 2012, featuring a picture of a shiba inu with words in Comic Sans font in the voice of the dog's internal monologue) functions mostly to make fun of Hudson and express anger/frustration about the situation, with the doge's words saying "yi-fen chow," "much fake," "many privilege," "such yawn," and "wow so reject." The doge meme can be categorized as a kind of stock character macro, a genre that also includes memes commonly known as advice animals despite the fact that they do not always have to include advice and that many human stock characters have been added to what used to be only animals. Shifman describes memes belonging to this family as

those that "build on a set of stock characters that represent stereotypical behaviors" (112). One such character is the "High Expectations Asian Father," which features the face of a middle-aged Asian man and macro text phrases that play on stereotypes of overbearing Asian immigrant parents who push their children to excel. A version of this meme was created for the YFC Tumblr with the text saying "Best American Poetry? Y u not best Chinese poetry too?" The success of this meme, and indeed of most stock character macro memes in general, hangs on the disruption of stereotypes. They would simply be tired clichés if an outsider who naively believed in the stereotypes made those jokes, but they become an exercise in community affirmation when an insider who understands the subtle nuances between what is common and what is essentialism makes them.

Because "politics—both in its broad sense as a societal construction of power and in its narrow sense as a system of governance—is deeply intertwined with the construction and consumption of Internet memes," memes can be seen as a form of political participation (Shifman 119), though the quality of that participation remains to be evaluated. Their adaptation for use by poets to address specific politicized situations shows their versatility, and also shows how poets can turn to available means of popular communication for political expression. In this era of what sociologists term "networked individualism," people use memes to "simultaneously express both their uniqueness and their connectivity" (30). Similarly, poets in diaspora express individuality through their works, which are also tied to the context of the diasporic communities of which they are a part. Networked individualism is therefore another aspect of cyberspace that closely mirrors the diasporic experience, in that the works analyzed in the previous three chapters articulate each writer's individual relationship to a broadly shared experience of Asian

diaspora. It makes sense for diasporic communities to turn to a medium that facilitates networked individualism to host their collective responses.

As for evaluating the impact of these activities or the quality of participation they inspire, previous sections of this chapter have argued that it is not a straightforward yes or no matter. Stefans reports that site activity on Circulars was high for about four months, helped by stories about it in the *Village Voice* and *Publisher's Weekly*, as well as by announcements to email lists of poets that Stefans knew. New posts were made daily and the comments sections were active, but site traffic predictably dropped off after Bush announced an end of hostilities in Iraq in May of 2003. Stefans announced that he would put the website into 'hibernation' mode after May, and thereafter decided that the site would remain up as an archive rather than a "lively cacophony of material" as it was during its peak (*Before* 269). This pattern of activity is very similar to what The Collected Works of YFC experienced. Activity and interest were highest when the blog was first established, corresponding with the height of interest in the event it was created to respond to, and features in relevant online publications such as the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog and popular Asian American news blog *Angry Asian Man* helped drive traffic to the site. Posts as well as interactions tapered off, however, as collaborators moved on to other projects and other news stories took the attention of reader-participants. The main collaborators discussed behind the scenes whether we wanted to put in the effort to turn the Tumblr into a bigger ongoing project with a larger scope, or to let it be a snapshot of just one specific moment, and ultimately decided much like Stefans did with Circulars that it would simply remain up as an archive rather than a continued living thing.

Digital collaborative poem-works can therefore have varying time spans. They can be a finite work with a start and finish, they can be dependent on external factors and therefore when

or if they end is unpredictable, or they can be like Project Rebuild and be indefinitely ongoing. This contingency, or open-endedness, of a digital project's endpoint is one more way the technology allows for new means of disrupting the constraints of traditional print texts, of blurring hierarchies and making texts more receptive to readerly interventions as well as more politically responsive. Works can be of the moment, responding instantly to current conditions and inviting immediate participation, and they can be kept in a state of continual flux as the contexts surrounding them and their collaborators change. Choices, and a much greater multiplicity of them compared to other texts, become a key facet of digital collaborative poem-works. The idea of choice and "the malleability of a narrative based on a user's *interaction* with a text" has almost become a cliché in championing electronic literature—Stefans points out that some "allusion to Roland Barthes usually appears here" as proponents argue that readers take on an active rather than passive role (*Before* 274). Beyond just the existence of choices, Stefans hopes that sites like Circulars take "a step in creating an ethics of 'choice' in hypertext literature," and also make "a gesture toward creating a 'poetics' of online activism, giving it a cultural tone beyond the merely critical or utilitarian," not for the sake of replacing conventional forms of activism and ethics but "to augment them and perhaps suggest new themes and angles" (275). In that way, Circulars, like *SwiftCurrent* before it, were the early forebears in a burgeoning wave of political community enacted through online poetic projects.

A person can become a part of a virtual collaboration simply by being on the site, but the more interactions they partake in, the more implicated they are in the creative project of the community. Sites that are very easy to understand, or functions that are very intuitive for a user, would tend to encourage more interaction than other platforms or functions. In Stefans' opinion, Circulars was a simple site with clear navigation, which he considered a benefit for engagement:

“My sense is that the very simple blog structure created a ‘centripetal’ motion—users were easily drawn deeper into its form to scroll downwards to reach new stories, etc.” while also creating “a ‘centrifugal’ motion” by “constantly point[ing] outside toward other sites and toward the lack of centrality of the reader in the political event” (“Toward” 277-8). Project Rebuild has similar centripetal energy in the arrangement of the navigational buttons, in that the ‘previous tenants’ and the ‘random’ buttons encourage readers to delve into other houses while the ‘renovate’ button makes the process for adding more writing straightforward. It has less centrifugal energy, but as previously discussed some of the experimental experimentations incorporate other media and sites, allowing for some radiation outwards. Tumblr, by comparison, has aspects that are less intuitive for users who have never used it before. Unlike the other two websites, users would need to create a Tumblr of their own in order to interact beyond reading and scrolling, and even with an account certain functions (such as reblogging, posting, or the multiple ways to use tags) are less obvious than others (such as the relatively simple process of liking or commenting). Through explaining how to make posts to other collaborators who had not used Tumblr before, I realized that the technical aspects and the intricacies of online culture on Tumblr did have a steeper learning curve than something like Circulars, which does create an in-group that can more easily interact in more substantial ways, despite the fact that ostensibly anybody can participate.

This pattern of increasing sophistication with increasing user uptake is common to most of the mass media technologies we have innovated through time. These new ways of virtual collaboration are enabled by the era of social media-based Internet technologies, but they are not new in the sense of without precedent. Rather, they are fresh ways of answering artistic and political questions that writers, readers, and creative collaborators have had long before the

advent of electronic media. This chapter has focused on returning to inquiries made in previous chapters in order to see what has changed with the addition of Internet technology, and with the ability to think of cyberspace as a diasporic space. The return is as important as the new answers, as it reiterates what I have claimed about the ongoing nature of these these themes: that the new nuances fit into an existing continuum of interests of Asian writers, some of whom have always turned to the available technologies of the time to experiment with alternative ways of expressing and interrogating what it means to be in diaspora. In this chapter, I have shown how new conceptions of simultaneous action, virtual co-presence, the role of the creator/reader, and political community are made possible through analytical readings of a variety of online texts and collaborative poem-works.

Conclusion

What I have set out to do in my dissertation, in the broadest sense, is make a case for reading a handful of selected poetic and cross-genre works through the common framework of Asian diaspora. My reasons for the importance of this reading framework have ranged from the political (the creation of imagined communities based not on the traditional idea of the nation-state but the nation-less and state-less) to the affective (the nostalgic, melancholic, attractive, and ludic pull of these poets to not only their subjects but to each other and their readers) to the technological (the ways in which diaspora as a reading technique allows us to see how digital innovations are continuous with a longer history of experimentation by writers of Asian descent, and allows us to rethink of cyberspace as a diasporic space). My hope is that my concept of diaspora as a reading framework can be applicable and useful to texts beyond the ones I have chosen, though what exactly that reading accomplishes in terms of real world stakes may be up for debate.

In the year 2018, as I finish writing this dissertation three years after its initial conception, two major Hollywood motion pictures came out that are touted as being significant milestones in Asian American cinematic history. The first is the romantic comedy *Crazy Rich Asians*, the first "major Hollywood film set in the present day showcas[ing] a majority Asian cast [since] a whopping 25 years ago, with "The Joy Luck Club"" (Ito). The other is *Searching*, starring John Cho, called the first Hollywood thriller with a leading Asian actor. Commentary on *Crazy Rich Asians'* contribution to Asian diasporic representation often emphasize volume—that it is a *majority* Asian cast, with Asian writers and an Asian director, going against the grain of tokenization that so often happens when one member of a minority group is made to stand in for diversity as a whole. The emphasis of ethnic commentary on *Searching*, alternatively, is on its

genre as a thriller movie—an Asian American male actor is starring in a movie that does not require him to perform any martial arts, the most predominant stereotype of Asian men in American film. Both are, in a sense, tapping into the desire to see people of Asian descent do more in global media than the roles that have been traditionally allowed to them.

The plot of *Crazy Rich Asians* deals with different lived experiences of being in the Asian diaspora. It centres around tensions that arise between wealthy Chinese flexible citizen immigrants to Singapore and middle-class Asian Americans who have developed distinct cultural identities of their own. The commentary and criticism about the movie in real life reflect a similar constellation of concerns about class, nation, and intra-Asian ethnic difference: the casting of biracial Anglo-Malaysian actor as the lead Chinese Singaporean actor drew accusations of pandering to Hollywood's preference for a "whiter" look, while Singaporean writers such as Kirsten Han and Jolene Tan criticize the film's erasure of "the Malay, Indian, and Eurasian (and more) populations who make [Singapore] the culturally rich and unique place that it is" to create a fantasy of affluent ethnic Chinese dominance (Han) where Singapore is reduced to being "purely incidental to this film, a kind of glittering touristic and commercial backdrop, rather than a real society" (Tan, qtd in Tsoi and Zhou). Singapore is another singular site, like Hong Kong but with its own unique politics and history, that puts into sharp relief the joys and anxieties of a society built from complex diasporas. If this dissertation project were to be expanded, Singapore would definitely be another case study that would add valuable new nuances to my project of defining and performing diaspora as a reading framework.

The other film of, *Searching*, is relevant to my interests not only in content but also form. Telling the story of a father's search for his missing teenaged daughter entirely through the mediation of a laptop screen, *Searching* is fundamentally about how the Internet is embedded,

embodied, and everyday in our contemporary lives—Christine Hine's *E3 Internet*. The movie addresses how knowing somebody, even one's own daughter, through in-person interaction only does not tell the whole story, as their online lives are just as much a part of who they are. Its preoccupation with technology is about both, diegetically, how it enables networks that construct our social identities and, extra-diegetically, how we can use it to frame narratives.

It feels somehow portentous that the moment I am wrapping up this dissertation is also the moment when these two films, which combined together address so many key elements of my work, are now showing in cinemas. Neither of the movies, to be fair, is attempting to be experimental poetry. Though *Searching* may be argued to experiment with form, both follow the established pacing notes of the tried and true Hollywood genres of rom-com and thriller respectively. Although I still cannot articulate for others what the stakes of reading diasporically may be, it seems to be apparent that more texts are being produced that ask to be read in this way. There continues to be a strong desire to create, consume, and interactively co-create works that interrogate what it means to be part of the Asian diaspora in the digital age.

Just as I have pointed out the importance of not uncritically engaging in cyber-utopianism, it is important to resist the utopian impulse with diasporic reading. Whatever it provides is less of a panacea for racial, ethnic, and class tensions in modern globalization or for the hegemonic practices of nation-states and more of a response to these issues. One must be realistic in remembering that the majority of the Internet is being used for the acceleration of capitalism rather than for experimental art, that the poetic movements of Flarf and conceptual writing started in the first place because the large part of electronic language being produced in breathless bulk is at best 'uncreative' and at worst aimed at reinforcing existing systems of oppression. Small acts of resistance are oftentimes also the only available means of resistance.

The conclusions I came to in the Hong Kong chapter can be generalizable for reading (and participating in) experimental poetry diasporically: there is both something triumphant in making something of your own despite having no say in what you get, and also something politically futile in the gesture of doing something knowing there is nothing else you can do. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, referenced in chapter three, examines the minor tactics people use to subvert mass culture through re-directing established ways of using objects, streets, laws, and language into their own unintended uses. In a way, everything considered in this document, from Dung's *Atlas* to social media to this very dissertation itself, engages in this same practice. The necessary obverse to de Certeau's celebration of the abundance of opportunities for ordinary folks to subvert massive entrenched institutions, though, is precisely the massiveness of those institutions, the entrenchment of their power that makes necessary these tactics—de Certeau's word for what is used by subjugated individuals, as opposed to strategies, which are employed by large institutions or systems. Andrew Blauvelt writes in *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life* that "By their very nature tactics are defensive and opportunistic, used in more limited ways and seized momentarily within spaces, both physical and psychological, produced and governed by more powerful strategic relations" (20). And perhaps that, ultimately, is the stakes of diaspora as a reading framework. It is a tactic that does not have much hope of changing the systemic conditions that produce the texts and the responses to the texts, but still strives to reappropriate life under those conditions through virtual community.

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