



*Beyond 9/11:
Poetics of Transcultural Agency in
Contemporary Ethnic American Poetry*

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FROM POSTMODERNISM TO POST-POSTMODERNISM: A BIRTH OR RESURRECTION?

All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart or whether we commit ourselves to an effort, a sustained effort to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children and to respect the dignity of all human beings. (Barack Obama 2009)

How far has the world changed in the first decade of the twenty-first century which witnessed, among many other calamities, 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, America's ferocious war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq, the global financial crisis, Asian Tsunamis, Haiti earthquake and the Swine Flu



pandemic? If the scientific excitement of early modernism¹ came to a terrible climax with the start of the First World War, if the remaining hopes in the waste land of late modernism were fatally stricken by the Second World War, could 9/11 attacks on the financial and military centers of the Western world be seen as the final blow to postmodern ego-consciousness, subjectivism and annihilation of truth, totality and universalism? Does the extraordinarily popular election of Barak Obama, the first African-American president in US, mark the resurrection of a post-postmodern utopia aware of its failures and mindful of potentials inherent in transcultural pollination? Have the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian peaceful revolutions, the dramatic ousting of longstanding autocratic regimes, and the radical change in the Western conception of Arabs testified the ability of human beings to rewrite the future of mankind away from historical burdens and national bias? To answer the above questions, one firstly needs to investigate the historical and cultural contexts that have agitated dissatisfaction with postmodernism and initiated the dire need for a new utopian collective consciousness with unshaken belief in transcultural agency and unabated confidence in culture-as-creativity rather than simply culture-as-belonging.

Though the demise of postmodernism², as Josh Toth argues, began in the mid 1980s, its fate seemed sealed in the mid 1990s when "the phrase 'after (or beyond)

¹ Modernism initially refers to "the tendency of experimental literature of the early twentieth century to break away from traditional verse forms, narrative techniques, and generic conventions in order to seek new methods of representation appropriate to life in an urban, industrial, mass-oriented age" (Lewis 2007: xvii). The excitement of rejection, liberty, and renovation; however, came to a terrible climax with the start of the First World War (1914-19), "which wiped out a generation of young men in Europe, catapulted Russia into a catastrophic revolution, and sowed the seeds for even worse conflagrations in the decades to follow" (Swenson et al. 2008: 1). Sinking into profound disillusionment and distrust of the values on which the whole human civilization has been founded, modernity began to be viewed in terms of crisis. "If the Victorian saw themselves as 'modernist' in the progressive sense, in the new century progress could seem a cruel myth" (Armstrong 2005: 1). Modernism has thus been characterized by a series of seeming contradictions: "both a rejection of the past and a fetishization of certain earlier periods; both primitivism and a defence of civilization against the barbarians; both enthusiasm for the technological and fear of it; both a celebration of impersonal making and a stress on subjectivity" (ibid.: 5).

² The term "Postmodernism" is a confused and vacuous term that does not have one simple definition in any field of study or practice. "Postmodern," the root term, writes Kathleen Fitzpatrick, seems to indicate "a chronological period that begins with the Holocaust, or the dropping of the first nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the Kennedy assassination, or the election of Ronald Regan, or some other moment of cultural trauma" (2006: 39-40). With the transformation of political economy from the nation-state system to the global village, "postmodernity," its first cognate term, came to indicate the cultural and material conditions of existence during that period. Finally, 'postmodernism' seems to indicate "a loosely defined and yet recurrent set of cultural manifestations of or responses to the conditions of postmodernity, styles that are evidenced in fragmentation, pastiche, parody, self-referentiality, and other highly ironized modes of discourse" (ibid.: 40). Postmodernism can be generally regarded as "a rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the past couple of centuries" (Sim 2005: vii). It is characterized by "the



postmodern' could be found on the cover of any number of critical works (2010: 2). With the radical change in the overall plot of world politics (from a bipolar to a unipolar world system), the rising opposition between centrifugal and centripetal forces, the unprecedented centrality of communication and mobility, the ongoing tension between globalism and multiculturalism, the dramatic disequilibrium between spiritual and technical progress (Nemoianu 2010: 15), and the grave environmental catastrophes resulting from anthropocentric abuse of nature, the world grew intolerant of postmodernism.

If postmodernism, as Paul Crosthwaite maintains, was a defense mechanism to isolate human beings and protect them against the intrusion of the hideous memories and brutal realities of the Second World War (2009: 42), 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terrorism demolished all barriers and forced mankind to view anew how inhuman humans can be. In his article "Postmodernism and Islam: Where to After September 11?" Akbar S. Ahmed writes:

After September 11, the Grand Narrative, which was assumed dead if not buried, was back with a vengeance especially in the USA. God, Christianity and the talk of the crusades were back at center stage and supported by the power of the mightiest military on earth. The challenge to postmodernism thus did not come from the expected quarters – neither French philosophers nor American architects. It came from George W. Bush at the White House and Osama bin Laden in the caves of Tora Bora in Afghanistan, who jointly struck a mighty blow to the concept and practice of postmodernism. (2007: 141)

The resurrection of the grand narratives; though, was not the final blow to postmodernism. It was the utter failure of America's war on terrorism and the worldwide massive destruction of US moral credibility that finally sealed the fate of postmodernism.

In his book *A Tragic Legacy: How Good Vs. Evil Mentality Destroyed the Bush Presidency*, Glenn Greenwald wrote:

The Bush presidency, awash in moralistic rhetoric, has ushered in some of the most extremist, previously unthinkable and profoundly un-American practices – from indefinite, lawless detentions, to the use of torture, to bloody preventive wars of choice, to the abduction of innocent people literally off the street or from their homes, to radical new theories designed to vest in the president the power to break the law [...] As the president ceaselessly proclaimed the Godness at the heart of America's destiny and its role in the world, his actions have

loss of the modern belief in (i) the moral progress of humankind in history, (ii) a conception of reason as ushering in universal agreement, or certainty, and (iii) a grand narrative account of being created human (assuming human sameness, not differences)" (Anderson 2005: 45).



resulted in an almost full-scale destruction of America's moral credibility in almost every country and on every continent. (2008: xiii)

The corpses of thousands of innocent Afghan and Iraqi civilians and the numerous accounts of brutal torture and sexual abuse in Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba and Abu Gharib prison in Iraq brought humanity face to face with memories of the holocaust and Hiroshima. The subsequent economic recession which went hand in hand with the failure of the world industrial powers to stand against the accelerating global warming and the anticipated environmental disasters created new pretexts for renouncing postmodernism.

Postmodernism was finally held responsible for loss of direction, absence of hope, as well as feelings of purposelessness, powerlessness, and uncertainty concerning "the future shape of the world, the right way of living in it, and the criteria by which to judge the rights and wrongs of the way of living" (Bauman 1997: 21). The postmodern contempt of traditional authority, undermining of social relations and insistence on the inexpressibility of language have not only dissembled texts and narratives but also bonds, memories and identities. In such a chaotic fragmented world human beings suffer from loss of moral compass and "chronic absence of resources with which they could build a truly solid and lasting identity, anchor it and stop it from drifting" (ibid.: 26). The rise "of relativism and skepticism to the level of a guiding doctrine" (Nemoianu 2010: 15), has not only turned the world into a labyrinth of endless questions and humans into automated passive subjects, but it has also deprived humanity from spiritual peace, social stability, and hopes for a better future.

In her book *Surpassing the Spectacle*, Carol Becker writes:

We are in a moment of post-postmodernism, conscious of all that has come before, tired of deconstruction, uncertain about the future, but convinced that there is no turning back. I agree with Stuart Hall that the use of post in postmodern and post-postmodern means that we have extended, not abandoned, the terrain of past philosophical work. (2002: 26)

In an atmosphere of disillusionment, retrospection and fear most voices in the academia rushed to explain the cultural trauma, defend postmodernism and prove its imperishable existence or to define, label and theorize the grand transitional epoch.



Labels such as POSTmodernism, neo-realism, hyper-realism, dirty realism, spiritual realism and post-positive realism have been coined to describe such turning point in human history. New insights have germinated based upon the notion that "absolute truth does exist, yet must be understood in terms of personality and animation." Prior to the "celebrated 'turn to language' (postmodernism) is the more fundamental 'turn to relationship' (post-postmodernism)" (Greer 2003: 229). Post-postmodernism witnesses "the re-birth of utopia after its own death, after its subjection to postmodernism's severe skepticism, relativism and its anti- or postutopian consciousness". Such resurrection of utopia is not regarded as "a social project with claims to transforming the world; it is an 'as if' lyricism, an 'as if' idealism, an 'as if' utopianism, aware of its own failures, insubstantiality, and secondariness" (Epstein 1999: 460-61). In such a post-postmodern context which marks a return to the totality, universality, truth and hope undermined by postmodern fragmentation and skepticism, transcultural agency comes to the fore as the savior of humanity.

TRANSCULTURAL AGENCY IN A POST-POSTMODERN CONTEXT

In his book *Migration Literature and Hybridity: The Different Speeds of Transcultural Change*, Sten Moslund argues:

It seems that we are witnessing a massive international and transnational defeat of gravity, an immense uprooting of origin and belonging, an immense displacement of borders, with all the clashes, meetings, fusions and intermixings it entails, reshaping the cultural landscapes of the world countries and cities. (2010: 2)

Nietzsche's description of the modern era as "the Age of Comparison" (2000: 33) – an era in which the various cultures of the world were beginning to interpenetrate each other," and "ideas of every culture would be side by side, in combination, comparison, contradiction and competition in every place and all the time" – provides the grounding principle for transcultural agency (Beck 2000: 19). In the past, as Heinz Antor puts it, "multiculturalism has created borders and boundaries which contributed to create barriers among cultural communities" (2010: iii). The catastrophic consequences of fragmenting the world into separate inimical cultures have created a dire need for transculturalism which "concentrates on the interaction among peoples and on crossing boundaries and cultures" (ibid.: iii).



Transculturality, according to Mary Louise Pratt, is "a phenomenon of the contact zone; it differs from concepts like acculturation and assimilation in that it emphasizes activity and creativity in contact situations" (1991: 36). Such dynamic nature of cultures which allows switching codes, shifting identities, expanding networks and shrivelling spaces is the basis for understanding transcultural agency.

In his book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Alasdair MacIntyre asserts:

We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others. (1985: 111)

In a globalizing world such amalgamation of stages and roles should not only determine interpersonal connections but it should also guide transcultural awareness and competence. Based on Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and the in-between, James Clifford's trope of the traveller, Mary Pratt's transcultural techniques of the contact zone, and Kevin Robins's conception of transcultural diversities, culture can no longer be perceived as a stable, homogeneous or delimited phenomenon dependent on national monologue. Exaggeration of the strangeness of strangers and the foreignness of foreigners, which has divided the world "between the West and the rest; between locals and moderns, between a bloodless ethic of profit and a bloody ethic of identity; between 'us' and 'them'" (Appiah 2006: XXI), can no longer be hosted or tolerated. In a globalized translocal mode of living and belonging, culture should be perceived as a universal contract negotiated through a comprehensive dialogic agenda that not only accepts the otherness of the other but also allows human beings to dwell in-between cultures, unshackled by the bonds of belonging, yet bound up with an obligation to create a better future.

Based on the post-postmodern conviction that the future is not bleak or lost, a belief in the power of words to transform the world has emerged like the phoenix out of postmodern ashes. In her book *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet*, Elizabeth Ammons writes:

Unless we identify what is wrong, we cannot heal the grievous wounds that human beings inflict on each other and the earth [...] If [professional humanists' analyses and critiques] are not in the service of positive social change, why do they exist? If we do not include answers alongside critiques, hope alongside anger, and activism alongside discourse and *talk about both terms* in each of these pairs, what is the point? We simply become the twenty-first century's proverbial monks in an ivory tower counting the number of angels on the head of a pin. (2010: 12)



Arguing that the value of humanities does not only reside in the “power of texts to teach us about ourselves, individually and corporately” but also “in the power of words to inspire us, to transform us, to give us strength and courage for the difficult task of re-creating the world” (ibid.: 14), Ammons highlights the role of literature in the post-postmodern context. Transgressing national boundaries, articulating the fluidity of culture, imaging the ethics of transcultural hybridity, and developing intercultural communication competence, literature can restore faith in the ability of human beings to re-read their past, re-interpret their present and re-write their future. Thanks to their exquisite ability to endure the tortures of diaspora, to negotiate cultural differences, to dissolve dichotomies between the self and the other, and to fly into the broader realms of universal syncretism, the Arab American poet Naomi Shihab Nye and the Chinese American poet Li-Young Lee have been selected for the study of transcultural agency in contemporary ethnic American poetry.

IMAGING TRANSCULTURAL AGENCY IN THE POETRY OF NAOMI SHIHAB NYE AND LI-YOUNG LEE

In an interview with WBI, Naomi Shihab Nye says:

As a child in St. Louis, I was as guilty as anyone of feeling that my own experience was the central experience on earth. Because St. Louis sits right in the middle of the country, perhaps it was easier to get away with this delusion. I hope that as we live and travel and meet people who don't match us exactly, we learn how many centers there are. Everywhere is a center. Everyone is a leading character! (2009:1)

Born in Missouri to a Palestinian father and an American mother, loaded with the tragic memories of her father “whose entire life was shadowed by grief over loss of his home in Palestine in 1948” (Nye, “Roots” 32), outraged by the daily calamities striking the Palestinians under Israeli occupation, confronted with the Western rejection/annihilation of the other, Nye has experienced the tortures of national schizophrenia – erosion or distortion of a valid and active sense of self through “the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by supposedly superior racial or cultural model” (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 9). The legacy of her father, “who never stopped describing what he saw as the terribly unfair situation in his homeland, supported mightily by the U.S. government” (Nye, “Roots” 32), has always interfered in Nye's conception of the American world to which she simultaneously belongs.



Unable to uproot her Palestinian origins or chop her American sprouts and determined to heal the painful schism in her hyphenated identity, Nye has decided to dwell in between cultures supported by her belief that blood is “bigger than what we’re born with, that blood keep[s] growing and growing as we live; otherwise how will we become true citizens of the world?” (Nye, “Roots” 32). As an author of numerous books of poems, including *Different Ways to Pray* (1980), *Hugging the Jukebox* (1982), *Yellow Glove* (1986), *Red Suitcase* (1994), *Fuel* (1998), *You and Yours* (2005) and *Honeybee* (2008); as an editor of different collections of poems such as *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from Around the World* (1996), *Salting the Ocean: 100 Poems by Young Poets* (2000) and *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2002); as an essayist, song writer, children’s book author, awardee of many prizes and fellowships, Nye has continuously and persistently enacted the human agency to cross barriers of place, time and identity.

In her poem “The World in Translation” published in her first volume *Different Ways to Pray* (1980), Nye creates a timeless moment wherein life merges into death and death grows into life. Blurring temporal and spatial barriers, Nye connects mankind and nature in a unique educational experience exposing the potentials inherent in deciphering the codes of nature:

It was a long climb out of the soil.
She counted off whole continents
as she lifted each foot,
imagined her dark years falling away like husks. (1-4)

Though different in color, shape and taste, “the peel of banana” (6), the “lightly waxed pepper”(7), “the peach softening in silence” (15-16), and “the mango, finely tuned to its own skin” (17) could not only transfer the grave realities of the macrocosm into the simple world of the microcosm, but they could also explain the rationale for celebrating ethnic and racial diversity.

Accepting different fruits into her home, and placing them “in bowls where they could be watched” (9), Nye’s female persona proclaims her decision to dilate her circle of belonging through bridging hyphenated spaces and building new empirical and psychological connections with the world beyond: “If she were to have anything to do with the world,/these would be her translators” (12-13). The universality of the message communicated through the glory and beauty of nature is neither altered in the various versions of translation nor affected by the diversity of translators.



Man's eternal connection to soil, unbreakable bond with nature and unavoidable sharing of sensual and emotional experiences not only exemplify the values of equality, fraternity and justice upon which the entire human world has been founded, but they also testify the ability of human beings to reach a common ground no matter how different their skins, languages or prayers may be.

Shifting from translating natural codes to recycling historic moments, Nye in "Cross that Line", which is included in her collection *You & Yours* (2005), responds to the US invasion of Iraq and the Israeli crimes against civilians in Gaza and the West Bank through the glorious memory of Paul Robeson (1889-1976):

Paul Robeson stood
on the northern border
of the USA
and sang into Canada
where a vast audience
sat on folding chairs
waiting to hear him. (1-7)

Though his passport was revoked "over his work in the anti-imperialism movement and what the U.S. State Department called Robeson's "frequent criticism while abroad of the treatment of blacks in the US" (Duberman 1988: 388-89), Robeson – the African American concert singer, athlete, actor and political activist – could defiantly resist the travel ban and reach out for an audience on the border between the Canadian province of British Columbia and Washington State. Robeson's ability to cross barriers and resist prejudice and injustice confirms Nye's belief in the power of art to bridge gaps and weave networks of intimate connections no matter how unfavorable the surroundings may seem.

The poem ends with a list of rhetorical questions challenging the cycle of prejudice and violence guiding the world politics:

Remind us again,
Brave friend.
What countries may we
Sing into?
What lines should we all
Be crossing?
What songs travel toward us
From far away
To deepen our days? (13-21)



Nye calls upon Paul Robeson to remind US people that violence is a betrayal of language; it suggests that “there was nothing more that could have been said to resolve a conflict, to move us forward” (Nye, “Buzz” 29). Meanwhile, Nye emphasizes that cross-cultural pollination and transcultural fluidity are the remedies for saving humanity from the drums of war and horrors of bloodshed.

Nye’s imagery of transcultural agency in her latest volume *Honeybee* (2008) is evoked not only by her concern for the Middle East tensions and the post 9/11 war on terrorism, but also by her desire to emphasize how the tiny, the individual and the particular can articulate the grave magnitude of war as well as the grand sublime of coexistence, tolerance and peace. In her introduction to *Honeybee*, Nye relates the victimization of honeybees, their mysterious disappearance from the United States and the subsequent dependence on hired bees for pollination to all the tragedies of the human world:

I collected theories. Were pesticides, or nasty varroa mites, which had swept the bee nation, most responsible? Could it be changing weather conditions or cell phone beams? Obviously the current atmosphere sizzles with more electronic signals than any world of the past [...] I was ready to pitch my cell phone out. Something called “colony collapse disorder” was often cited as a possibility. Seemed like a parallel for human beings in times of war. War is no blossom. (2-3)

The disappearance of honeybees is just one of the consequences resulting from man’s consistent abuse of nature, nations, races and individuals. It’s an alarm for humans to increase their level of attention, cling to the remaining hope in transcultural agency, stop losing any more “of the small things that blink” in their darkness, and learn from the facts about insects and animals which “feel refreshing these days, when human beings are deeply in need of simple words like ‘kindness’ and ‘communicate’ and ‘bridge’” (Nye *Honeybee* 8). Such three simple words with which Nye concludes her introduction of *Honeybee* constitute the thematic, aesthetic and rhetorical core not only of Nye’s volume but also of her mission in life and her view of the universe.

In her poem “Bees Were Better” Nye compares the world of bees to the world of human beings asserting the superiority of bees in terms of communication, interaction, productivity and creativity. The poem starts with a depiction of the fragility and destructibility of human relationships:

In college people were always breaking up.
We broke up in parking lots,
beside fountains.
Two people broke up across the table from me
at the library



I could not sit at that table again
though I didn't know them. (1-8)

Ironically, the contact zones where cars stand together or books stack one beside the other are the locations chosen for tearing webs of mutuality and understanding. Though the spatial, natural, empirical and communal attachment, suggested through the images of the parking lots, fountains, library and table, could not resist man's insistence on breaking relationships, it meanwhile testifies that hope still exists.

Calling upon human beings to watch bees and learn how to communicate, interact, and collaborate, Nye stresses her belief that ecological consciousness and transcultural interaction are the only radar left for humanity to guide it safely home amidst horrors of wars, mazes of politics, and inequities of economic interests:

I studied bees, who were able
To convey messages through dancing
And could find their ways
Home to their hives
Even if someone put up a blockade of sheets
And boards and wire.
Bees had radar in their wings and brains
That humans could barely understand. (9-16)

Nye's "indefatigable insistence that life holds joy and goodness amidst its many despairs" (Larios 2008: 88) is manifested in the final lines of the poem when the world of bees and the world of human beings are artfully merged:

I wrote a paper proclaiming
their brilliance and superiority
and revised it at a small café
featuring wooden hive-shaped honey dippers
in silver honeypots
on every table. (17-22)

The table finally assumes its cultural position and function – a contact zone or a site of power where differences are negotiated, otherness is assimilated, togetherness is enacted and potentials of transcultural pollination are triggered.



Echoing Nye's poetics of cultural fluidity and desire to build connections with one's experience, on the one hand, and with the entire universe, on the other, Li-Young Lee has devoted his poetry to carrying out "a dialogue with the universe". In an interview with Tod Marshall, Li-Yong Lee says:

I am perfectly convinced that that's what I am, the universe. I can't live it. Why? So the poetry comes out of that. The poetry comes out of a need to somehow – in language – connect with universe mind, and somehow when I read poetry – and maybe all poetry is quest, a poetry of longing – when I read poetry, I feel I'm in the presence of universe mind;...SO that's why I read poetry, and that's why I write it, to hear that voice, which is the voice of the universe. (2000: 130)

To heal his personal predicament – a child born in Indonesia, forced to live in exile throughout Hong Kong, Macau and Japan with his politically persecuted father, and finally brought to the United States to experience the tortures of belonging to the negatively stereotyped Chinese diaspora – Lee has decided to transcend spatial limits, reconstruct fragmented memories, and resurrect a universal identity out of personal ruins. When asked to explain where he is from, Lee answered:

I say Chicago, then I tell them I was born in Indonesia, but I'm adamant about insisting that, although I was born in Indonesia, I'm Chinese. I don't want them to think that I'm Indonesian – my people were persecuted by the Indonesian. (qtd. In Lorenz 2002: 257)

Ironically such feelings of homelessness have strengthened Lee's belief in cultural fluidity. In his collections of poems which include *Rose* (1986), *The City in which I was Born* (1990), *Book of My Nights* (2001) and *Behind My Eyes* (2009), Lee has consistently created intimacies across spatial, temporal and national distances.

In his poem "I Ask My Mother to Sing" published in his first volume *Rose* (1986), Lee draws overlapping networks of relations where here and the there, the past and the present, the self and the other, the alive and the dead are skillfully connected. Transgressing boundaries of time, space and reality, Lee creates a lively singing concert where his mother, grandmother, and his dead father are chanting their memories back to life:

She begins, and my grandmother joins her.
Mother and daughter sing like young girls.
If my father were alive, he would play
His accordion and sway like a boat. (1-4)



Lee's imagined boat immediately transcends geographical borders to reconstruct a homeland out of fragmented memories:

I've never been in Peking, or the Summer Palace,
nor stood on the great Stone Boat to watch
the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers
running away in the grass. (5-8)

Lee, as Johnny Lorenz puts it, "travels to a homeland made of words, a China that is sung. His poem serves as a space in which a mother's memory – the very geography of her stories – can be committed to paper and subsequently re-visited by a son or by a reader" (2002: 160). The final image of the poem: "Both women have begun to cry. / But neither stops her song" (13-14), portrays the torments of exile, yet meanwhile, depicts the potentials of living in between cultures, and asserts the ability of human beings to retrieve and revise their connections with their lost or found worlds.

In his interview with Tod Marshall, Lee illustrates his conception of transcultural agency in the following terms:

So you're creating value when you write a poem. And I don't mean immaterial value. I mean material value! I mean someone in China – and they've proven that on the physical scale, that when a butterfly flies across Tienamen Square, it affects the weather in Florida. In minute and inevitable ways, everything is connected. In the invisible realm – which has more reality than the visible realm because the visible is dying and without materiality – when somebody writes a poem, when he opens himself up to universe mind and that universe mind is suddenly present in the visible world, the poet isn't the only one that gets the benefits of that. Universe mind comes down and that whole mind is a little more pure, a little more habitable [...] We keep the world together. If we stop writing poems, you'll see this world go into such darkness, they won't even know what hit them. (2000: 146)

Like Naomi Shihab Nye, Lee believes that poems not only enable human beings to navigate thoughts, emotions and experiences but they also guide humanity out of the darkness of fragmentation, uncertainty and despair. In his poem "My favorite kingdom" published in his collection *Behind the Eye* (2009), Lee weaves a web of mutuality extending from the tiniest creatures and simplest joys to encompass the entire universe:

My favorite day is Sunday.
My favorite color is
my father's pear trees
in a cloud of bees.



My favorite day is Tuesday.
My favorite window
Looks onto two oceans:
One a house
In various stages of ruin and beginning
And one a book
Whose every word is lifelong sentence. (1-11)

Through merging empirical, physical, sensual and emotional realms, Lee manages to create a new image of universality based on intimacy and shared enjoyment of natural blessings. Chronological and numerical sequences – Sunday and Tuesday, son and father, two oceans, one house and one book – merge different loci of cultural identity and amalgamate roots of ethnic and national belonging.

In the conclusion of her book *Crossing Cultures: Creating Identity in Chinese and Jewish American Literature*, Judith Oster maintains that “a reading experience suddenly forces us to confront may be our own ignorance – of other cultures, of our own – or perhaps our unacknowledged need for likeness and community” (2003: 261-62). Lee’s poetic vision of doors in “My Favorite Kingdom” opens channels of communication not only between the poet and reader or between the reader and the text but also between the reader and the universe:

My favourite door opens two ways:
Receiving and receiving. My heart
Swings between the ways, from thanksgiving
To thanksgiving, a thousand times a day,
While its naked feet graze
Death’s knobby head
A thousand times a day. (24-30)

Sharing the poet’s empowering, healing and enlightening experiences, the reader comes to a better understanding of the poetics of universal dialogue. The human mind, heart and body are doors open both ways to receive signals, decipher codes and send back messages of gratitude, glorification and hope.

In their lifelong journey to preach and practice the ethics and poetics of transcultural agency, Nye and Lee have cheerfully celebrated cultural difference, smoothly dissolved dichotomies between the self and the other, and skilfully deployed an “aesthetic of smallness to represent a counter sublime of benevolence and global connectivity” (Najmi 2010: 168). Overcoming tortures of alienation and pressures of belonging, inviting ghosts of forbears and shadows of descendants, compromising conceptions of the self and perceptions of the other, Nye and Lee have resisted blind submission to preconceived racial stereotypes, arrogant resistance of cultural cross-



fertilization, psychological surrender to national schizophrenia or forceful yielding to historical amnesia. Failing to impose or retain national sovereignty, and conscious of the vast proliferation of transnational cultural spaces, Nye and Lee have provided a new terrain of cultural debate established on the principle of culture-as-creativity, rather than simply culture-as-belonging. Articulating their responses to the reactionary choices triggered by the cultural clash between the Orient and the Occident, or the self and the other, and enacting their belief in the ability of human beings to re-interpret their past and re-write their future, both poets have testified how potentially productive tension between an imposed and an inherited culture can liberate literary energies and create imaginative forms to articulate the post-postmodern obligations of cultural in-betweenness. Nye's and Lee's imagery of cultural fluidity also highlights how national schizoids can finally glue the shattered fragments of their identities, and break free from the nets of nation, language, and religion to fly into the broader realms of transcultural hybridity.

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