"The Art of Memory": The Creation of Memory, the Subject, and Poetic Language in the Poetry of Li-Young Lee

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Contemporary Asian American literary criticism has reached what Stephen Sohn and John Gamber describe as "the meta-critical phase" (5). In Sohn and Gamber's description, Asian American criticism has come to be characterized by diversity and multiplicity, to the extent that "'Asian American literature' as a term is collapsing under the weight of its very heterogeneity" (6).[1] Zhou Xiaojing also observes that recent studies, departing from the cultural nationalist stance of earlier critics such as Frank Chin and Elaine Kim, employ "a major new strategy of redefining Asian American literature as a literature of exile and diaspora rather than as a variety of immigrant narratives" ("Critical Theories" 10).

Criticism of Li-Young Lee reflects this new scholarly phase, with Guiyou Huang featuring a well-known poem by Lee, "Persimmons," as the most "appropriate example to illustrate" the oscillating positioning of identity of Asian American poets and ethnic writers ("The Makers" 6), and critics such as Walter Hesford, Jeffrey F. L. Partridge, and Zhou questioning earlier readings of Lee's poetry that located it exclusively in the context of Asian American literature.[2] Nonetheless,

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[1] Sohn and Gamber see the new meta-critical phase as "extending from 1995 to the present" (5). Zhou Xiaojing traces a similar paradigm shifts in Asian American studies to the late 1980s ("Critical Theories" 9). Debate continues as to which influential works inaugurated the new phase, with candidates including Lisa Lowe's 1991 essay, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity"; the 1992 volume, *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling; Lowe's 1996 *Immigrant Acts*; or Susan Koshy's 1996 critique of Elaine Kim and Frank Chin, "The Fiction of Asian American Literature." In any case, contemporary criticism generally reflects, as Zhou puts it, "Asian American scholars' growing awareness that the expressive model, and thematically oriented sociological methodology within a cultural nationalist framework, are inadequate for the analysis of current developments in Asian American literature" ("Critical Theories" 8). See also Huang, "Global"; Lim, et al., "Cross Wire" and Introduction.

[2] Zhou critiques the earlier criticism on Lee by Gerald Stern, L. Ling-chi Wang, and Henry Yiheng Zhao, who emphasize Lee's Chinese ethnicity and diminish "the rich cross-cultural sources of influence on Lee's work and of the creative experiment in his poetry" ("Inheritance" 114). Hesford analyzes Lee's

general readings of Lee's work have tended to remain focused on his immigrant cultural heritage, and even to adhere to the earlier cultural nationalist stance, as in Victoria Chang's negative assessment of "Persimmons" as "'protest literature' exposing their [the first generation's] inferior treatment by the mainstream culture" (xv-xvi). Even those critics who evaluate Lee's textual heterogeneity in postmodern discursive contexts tend to reduce it to the product of an ethnically marked writer's political strategy; thus Huang argues that "if we place the poem ['Persimmons'] in the discursive context of postcolonial understanding of center/periphery, ignorance/knowledge, authority/subjugation, white/colored, teacher/student, we can read the poem as bristling challenge to presumed authority, a political move to center what has been the marginal" (6). This evaluation of Lee's work in terms of the identity politics of a diaspora is valid, but seems dismissive of the rich complexity of Lee's poetics.

Such criticism, frequently centering on autobiographical motifs abundant in Lee's poetry,[3] fails to acknowledge the complexity of Lee's poetics in three respects. First, in emphasizing the conflict of the immigrant with the mainstream culture, it overemphasizes the dichotomy of Asian versus American. Second, in its approach to Lee's memories of his immigrant childhood, it rarely offers the kind of nuanced analysis the work invites, though Asian American criticism has produced such autobiographical analysis since the controversy over Chin's notorious criticism of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and *The China Men*, in which he inappropriately drew a distinction between "the real" and "the fake" in postmodern autobiographical prose that resists such distinctions.[4] Third, and most crucially, such criticism hardly begins to expose the close interplay between the retelling of memory and the invention of poetic language at the heart of Lee's poetry.

The City in Which I Love You in terms of biblical influences, but concludes that Lee's book of poetry is a "distinctively Chinese-American rendition of the biblical Song" (37). Partridge reads Lee's "The Cleaving" as engaging in a dialogic relationship with the Emersonian and Whitmanesque transcendentalisms, and as questioning the either/or opposition of Asian American and American authorial identities, but nonetheless focuses on the dialectic relationship between these authorial identities.

[3] In an interview with Lee, Laura Ann Dearing and Michael Graber begin one of their questions with the assumption that "[Lee] write[s] very autobiographical poems" (88). Wenying Xu offers the following summary of Lee's first two books of poetry: "Lee's poetry portrays two stages of his life—a lonely child [. . .] and a searching young man" (206). In Zhou's analysis, "[t]he lyric I in Lee's poems [. . .] is often an autobiographical I" (*Ethics* 30) that challenges the "disembodied subject" of "the traditional lyric I" (28).

[4] For more on this controversy, which sparked a broad reevaluation of Asian American literature, see Davis 43-44; Ueki x-xi; Zhou, "Critical Theories" 5-8. Kingston's work, as well as the critical arguments that have emerged on it, have broadened the conception of autobiography, as Davis shows.

In this paper, I attempt to redress this critical failure through an exploration of the complex workings of memory in Lee's poetry. In "This Room and Everything in It," Lee says,

> I am making use
> of the one thing I learned
> of all the things my father tried to teach me:
> the art of memory. (*City* 49)

Lee's present-participle explanation of the action of his poetic persona, "I am making use / of [. . .] / the art of memory," may be understood to concern the act of memorizing. Lee's father, who exerted a great influence on Lee's life and poetics, was a person with an extraordinary memory; he memorized 300 T'ang poems, as required to complete a classical Chinese education, and moreover mastered seven languages (Heyen and Rubin 19; Moyers 33). Lee does not share his father's mnemonic skill, but it is not memorization of the sort at which his father excelled that Lee acclaims as significant. In "Mnemonic," Lee writes, "a man who forgot nothing, my father / would be ashamed of me," and goes on to characterize his own memory as "a heap / of details, uncatalogued, illogical" (*Rose* 66). Yet with his refrain of "[m]emory is sweet" toward the end of the poem (66), Lee implicitly subverts the value of logically organized memory. At once revering his father's remarkable ability, and praising the illogical and the intuitional—which his father's instruction unintentionally awakened in him in "Persimmons"—Lee conveys his ambivalent appreciation of his father's lessons. If "the art of memory" extends beyond mnemonics, what does it suggest associatively and metaphorically? How is the subject "I" "making use / of [. . .] / the art of memory" ? In my approach to these questions, I show that "the art of memory" explicates Lee's poetic principle.

I. A Meta-Poetic Narrative Underlying an Immigrant Autobiographical Narrative

Wenying Xu's reading of "Persimmons" typifies the contemporary approach to Lee's poetry:

> In "Persimmons," Lee writes about a sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Walker. The reader understands that the immigrant child was humiliated for mispronunciations and that the sixth grader understood perfectly the meanings of the two words *persimmon* and *precision*. Lee goes on to describe his precise knowledge of persimmons in order

> to expose the monolingual, racist culture that Mrs. Walker represents. Mrs. Walker brought a green persimmon to class and mistakenly called it a "*Chinese apple*" (*Rose* 18). She cut it up with a knife and divided it among the children. Lee declined his share because of his knowledge of the sour and astringent taste of an unripe persimmon, but he was not spared when the other children scrunched up their faces, silently accusing the Chinese boy of belonging to a foolish people who eat such terrible-tasting "apples." Other words also caused Lee trouble, such as *fight* and *fright*. In these small examples of misusing English words, Lee vividly pictures the difficulties of his early childhood, but his loneliness and pain at school are balanced by love and tenderness at home. (207)

Xu's account focuses on Lee's autobiographical narrative, concentrating on Lee's memory of his conflict as a sixth-grade immigrant child with the mainstream American culture. In the poem, the poet-child's humiliating experiences with his teacher Mrs. Walker are recalled in the first and fifth stanzas of the thirteen-stanza poem. These two stanzas have often been cited as conveying the main theme of the poem, and Zhou, in accord with this critical tendency, cites the first, second, and fifth stanzas in series, as if the third and fourth stanzas did not exist (*Ethics* 31). If one reads the first, second, and fifth stanzas sequentially, one encounters the poet-persona's memories of Mrs. Walker chronologically, beginning with Mrs. Walker's punishment of the child Lee for his misuse of the English words "*persimmon* and *precision*" (first stanza), continuing with Lee's demonstration of his precise, Chinese way of eating persimmons (second stanza), and concluding with a later incident in which "Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class / and cut it up / so everyone could taste" that green "*Chinese apple*" (fifth stanza). A reading that foregrounds the immigrant child's traumatic memories naturally centers on these stanzas, and diminishes the significance of the third stanza and the overall structure of the poem.

What is the reader to make, however, of the third stanza, with its vivid depiction of the present-time, adult poet's love-making with his wife, "Donna"? The scene of the poet's sensual love for his wife is intelligible only if the reader understands the late father's words in the last stanza, rather than the immigrant child's cultural conflicts, to relate the main theme of the poem: "*Some things never leave a person: / scent of the hair of one you love, / the texture of persimmons, / in your palm, the ripe weight*" (*Rose* 19). Even when material possessions and physical faculties are lost, "*[a]ll gone*" (19) like the father's vision, the sensual memory of love is recalled in the body. Such memories are the record not of specific past experiences but of

sensation itself. Sensation associates spatially and temporally distant objects with one another in "Persimmons"; the sweetness and weight of ripe persimmons is associated with that of love. Through the memories of persimmons at school and at home distributed associatively throughout the poem, the persona arrives at his father's lesson of love and sensual memory at the end, relating it to his present immersion in erotic love for his wife.

Xu's understanding of Lee's "use of a unifying object, be it a persimmon [in 'Persimmons'] or hair [in 'Dreaming of Hair']" to "[link] the different landmarks of Lee's journey of the heart" (207-08) might lead the reader to think that the poem is a record of "Lee's journey of the heart," a disorganized collection of spatially and temporally distant memories. From this viewpoint, Lee's poetic texts might be understood as fragmentary autobiography, in which, as in Rocío Davis's analysis of Kingston's and Michael Ondaatje's postmodern collagic autobiographies, "the narrator's process of memory as non-linear, associative, non-temporal, fragmented, and incomplete" invalidates traditional autobiographical elements such as "chronology, personal history, and evolving perceptions of self" (46).

A reading of Lee's poetry as postmodern rather than traditional autobiography affords some insight, but does not account for his insightful conception of the retroactive workings of memory through corporeal subjectivity. The memories represented in Lee's poetry are not just enumerations of past experiences, they are reconstructions of intensive sensations of past events inscribed in the poet's body. For Lee, such sensations can be reconstructed only through the present physical senses. Lee's representation of memory shows that the past does not produce the present; past experiences do not gradually and chronologically accumulate in memory to yield the present self. On the contrary, present physical subjectivity recreates past experience in memory retroactively.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's criticism of "accepted formulas about 'the rôle of memories in perception'" affords insight into this retroactive sense of time in Lee's work. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty calls into question the empiricist formula, "'to perceive is to remember'" (22). For Merleau-Ponty, recognition of an already familiar object "cannot result from the recollection of memories, but must precede it," and "[n]owhere then does it work from past to present" (23). Merleau-Ponty argues,

> To perceive is not to experience a host of impressions accompanied by memories capable of clinching them; it is to see, standing forth from a cluster of data, an immanent significance without which no appeal to memory is possible. To

> remember is not to bring into the focus of consciousness a self-subsistent picture of the past; it is to thrust deeply into the horizon of the past and take apart step by step the interlocked perspectives until the experiences which it epitomizes are as if relived in their temporal setting. To perceive is not to remember. (26)

For Merleau-Ponty, memory is not "a self-subsistent picture of the past" because past experiences are constructed as such only in their transient recreation in transiently present consciousness. It is this aspect of memory to which Merleau-Ponty refers in his observation that "the 'projection of memories' is nothing but a bad metaphor" (23).

In Lee's poetry, similarly, the figuration of past experience as memory is possible only in its reliving in the poet's present consciousness. Thus, the father's words at the ending of "Persimmons" are reconstituted not in Chinese but in English, although Lee's family spoke Chinese at home (Fluharty 96) and Lee's father almost certainly conveyed his lesson of love to his poet-son Lee in Chinese. In the poem, the last lines of the father's words do not even seem to be translated from Chinese literally, since the repetition of the focal words "persimmons" and "precision" seems calibrated to bring out vivid English rhythms. In textual practice, the present writing self alters past experience to produce familiar but new experiences, though in reading this "autobiographical" poem the reader may experience the illusion of sharing the poet's memories as "a self-subsistent picture of the past."[5] Memory in Lee's work represents the way the present renews the past.

Lee's "The Gift" also concerns his recreation of the past in present sensation. The poem begins with the poet-persona's memory of a childhood experience of his father's aid, told in the past tense: "To pull the metal splinter from my palm / my father recited a story in a low voice. / I watched his lovely face and not the blade. / Before the story ended, he'd removed / the iron sliver I thought I'd die from" (*Rose* 15). In the second stanza, the tense shifts to the present as the adult-poet speaks: "I can't remember the tale, / but hear his voice still, a well / of dark water, a prayer" (15). The recollection of the poet-persona is explicit: "I recall his [father's] hands, / [. . .] / he laid against my face" or "the flames of discipline / he raised above my

[5] Paul John Eakin argues that "[contemporary authors] no longer believe that autobiography can offer a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past" (5), and that "memory and imagination become so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice" (6). I aim to demonstrate further that the complex workings of memory in Lee's poetry, in its susceptibility to imagination, are represented as occurring in daily life as well as in writing practice.

head" (15). In the third and fourth stanzas, the persona links the memory of his father's removal of the metal splinter from his palm to his present act of removing a splinter from his wife's hand.

> Had you entered that afternoon
> you would have thought you saw a man
> planting something in a boy's palm,
> a silver tear, a tiny flame.
> Had you followed that boy
> you would have arrived here,
> where I bend over my wife's right hand.
>
> Look how I shave her thumbnail down
> so carefully she feels no pain.
> Watch as I lift the splinter out.
> I was seven when my father
> took my hand like this,
> and I did not hold that shard
> between my fingers and think,
> *Metal that will bury me,*
> christen it Little Assassin,
> Ore Going Deep for My Heart.
> And I did not lift up my wound and cry,
> *Death visited here!*
> I did what a child does
> when he's given something to keep.
> I kissed my father. (*Rose* 15-16)

In view of the progression of the poem from the first stanza, the chronological development of the motif of "the flames of discipline" (*Rose* 15) or "a lesson, a gift of tenderness" (Moyers 36) is apparent. The flow of time follows that of the poem, moving from the memory of the father in the past to the present persona's experience with his wife. "The Gift," like "Persimmons," demonstrates that a lesson of love from the poet's father carries forward into the present poet's erotic relationship with his wife. Lee's representation of a fluid conception of love across parental, homosexual, and heterosexual domains merits discussion, but careful reading of "The Gift" in terms of memory and time reveals that the reader

encounters the illusion of the chronological sense of time vis-à-vis memory in the poem, the illusion that the self-subsistent past experience exists in the beginning, then develops into present experience.

Lee explains the incident that gave rise to "The Gift" in an interview with Bill Moyers:

> **Lee:** I was with my wife in a hotel and I woke up and heard her sobbing. I looked for her and she was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, sobbing and holding her hand. I noticed that her hand was bleeding, and when I looked there was a splinter under her thumbnail. My father was dead at the time, but when I bent down to remove the splinter I realized that I had learned that tenderness from my father.
>
> (Moyers 35-36)

Lee's explanation shows how the poet's present act of removing a splinter from his wife's palm with tenderness was the starting point for the reconstruction of the picture of the past poet-boy and his father in "The Gift." In the mechanism of memory, the shadow of the past is not projected onto that of the present, but rather, the shadow of the present is projected onto that of the past. No crystallized memory, like "a silver tear," is withdrawn from the poet's store of memory; memory is rather created in the present consciousness to relive past experience.

In the last line of the poem, the persona recounts, from the viewpoint of the boy, "I kissed my father." According to Lee, however, Chinese tradition prevailed in his home such that his siblings and he were not allowed to kiss their father and "couldn't even get near his face" (Kirkpatrick 112). Lee therefore "watched [his] father like the weather" and found "moments [he] could sneak a kiss in" (112). Hence, the boy's kissing his father in the last line of the poem, though it may be read as natural and customary from the viewpoint of mainstream American culture, may not reproduce biographically verifiable fact. Rather, the kiss may reflect the sensibility of the present poet, who has become habituated to American family culture. One might speculate that the wife kissed the present poet in thanks for removing her splinter, and that the poet projected this invisible kiss into the past as the imagined kiss of the boy thanking his father. In any case, the poem dramatizes the mechanism of memory: the recreation of the past through present consciousness.

It is significant that in addition to the past tense narrative of the first stanza and the present tense recounting of the second stanza, the third stanza introduces a third viewpoint, that of "you," in contrast to the viewpoints of the past boy

and the present narrator. The introduction of "you" in the subjunctive mood functions to question the reliability of the poet's narration of past and present. This "you," referring to the reader or any hypothetical observer, suggests that just as the impossible act of an observer tracing the past and present of the boy-poet may be imagined and visualized, scenes of the boy that never took place in reality may also be imagined and visualized in the present. In the last stanza, the narrator explains what the boy *did not* do, in the lines "and I did not hold that shard" and "And I did not lift up my wound and cry." Such evocative images as "*Metal that will bury me*," "Little Assassin, / Ore Going Deep for My Heart" and "*Death visited here!*" paradoxically evoke pictures of a boy performing actions he never performed in the past. Given that the present narrator does "think," "*Metal that will bury me*, / christen it Little Assassin," what the past boy did not do comes to exist in the visualization of the present narrator in the poetic text. That is, the process of recreating past experience in the present is enacted in the text.

Lee's "autobiographical" poems, which seem naïvely to recount fragmentary past experiences, thus demonstrate an ongoing meta-poetic narrative of the process whereby the past is recreated as memory in the present. The layering of this narrative over autobiographical narrative is characteristic of Lee's poetics. In particular, Lee employs the multiplicity of meta-poetic and naïve narratives in explicating the act of writing a poem. For Lee, the mechanism of memory is bound up with that of creating a poem.

II. "The Art of Memory" and the Creation of Poetry: Love and Death in "This Room and Everything in It"

How the mechanism of memory is bound up with that of poetic composition, in other words, how "the art of memory" is transformed into a poetic principle, is demonstrated in "This Room and Everything in It." Let us approach the poem from the point of view of the poet-narrator, "I." In the second and third stanzas, the reader encounters the narrator, "I," undertaking a particular project of memory.

This Room and Everything in It

Lie still now
while I prepare for my future,
certain hard days ahead,
when I'll need what I know so clearly this moment.

I am making use
of the one thing I learned
of all the things my father tried to teach me:
the art of memory.

I am letting this room
and everything in it
stand for my ideas about love
and its difficulties. (*City* 49)

What is "the art of memory" that the narrator is "making use / of"? According to the third stanza, it is the practice the narrator pursues in attempting to transform "this room / and everything in it" into "my ideas about love / and its difficulties." The narrator might appear to be fixing in memory individual elements of the room, but in the second and eighth stanzas the narrator insists on reserving the memory of each thing in the room only "to tell myself something intelligent / about love" one day (*City* 50). "[T]he art of memory" does not aim at preserving things in memory. Even if it did, it leads the narrator in the ninth and tenth stanzas towards the oblivion of failed memory:

I'll close my eyes
and recall this room and everything in it:
My body is estrangement.
This desire, perfection.
Your closed eyes my extinction.
Now I've forgotten my
idea. The book
on the windowsill, riffled by wind . . .
the even-numbered pages are
the past, the odd-
numbered pages, the future.
The sun is
God, your body is milk . . .

useless, useless . . .
your cries are song, my body's not me . . .

no good . . . my idea
has evaporated . . . your hair is time, your thighs are song . . .
it had something to do
with death . . . it had something
to do with love. (*City* 50)

Yet when the narrator relates the intrusion of oblivion—"Now I've forgotten my / idea," and "my idea / has evaporated . . ."—the tone is more one of praise than of lamentation. He also describes mnemonic efforts to resist oblivion as "useless" and "no good."

If the poet-persona does not lament the evaporation of memory, nor accept oblivion nihilistically, what is the reader to make of the relationship between memory and oblivion in this poem? In the fourth stanza, the "I" says,

I'll let your love-cries,
those spacious notes
of a moment ago,
stand for distance. (*City* 49)

In the act of making love, the subject reaches the closest possible approach to the other, but nevertheless the subject feels an unbridged distance between himself and the other; hence, the "love-cries" that reach the "I" launched out of "you" "a moment ago." This temporal remove that the narrator observes between lovers exemplifies the poet's view that each thing the subject "I" tries to perceive has already passed; only the traces of the lost entity can be perceived. Thus, the interaction in "This Room" between the corporeal subject and the other who emerges in and disappears from the subject's senses dramatizes the relationship between memory and oblivion, or between the formation and evaporation of ideas.

The sense of distance between the subject's consciousness and the lost entity develops into the persona's realization that even "[m]y body is estrangement" in the ninth stanza, and that "my body's not me . . ." in the tenth stanza. Not only the outside world, but the subject's very corporeal existence turns quickly into the other. At each moment the corporeal entity of the "I" dissolves and another corporeal subject "I" emerges to recognize the dissolution of the "I" of the moment past. Lee observes, "this body itself is already the past. This body itself is the late report of an earlier body. Everything that occurred here, everything occurring here,

is the late report of an earlier event" (Dearing and Graber 87). This understanding of the corporeal subject as such is performed by the persona "I" throughout the poem, and in particular in the last lines, in the association he draws to love and death: "it had something to do / with death . . . it had something / to do with love" (*City* 50).

Lee has often said that "there are only two subjects [in his poetry]: love and death" (Cooper and Yu 63). "Love" is interchangeable for "life" in Lee's view, so Lee's themes of love/life and death may be understood to include the ceaseless repetition of the emergence and dissolution of the self and external world that comprises corporeal existence. In "This Room," the subject's consciousness of the tension between love/life and death, or between emergence and dissolution, is metaphorized as the drama between memory and oblivion. The representation of memory in the text indicates that this life and death of subjectivity is not divided into two irreversible long-terms but rather is an innumerably repeated alternation. The alternation of life and death in the experience of subjectivity accords too with Lee's sense of time not as an irreversible flow but as alternating repetition of past and future. Hence, in the ninth stanza, "the even-numbered pages are / the past, the odd- / numbered pages, the future." It follows that "[t]he book," the pages of which alternate between the past and the future, represents the narrator's mind, that is, the corporeal subject that emerges in the momentary present between the past and the future.

This view of the subject-in-process relates to Lee's view of poetic creation; indeed, he explains both in terms of "love" and "death": "You know, you only have two subjects, love, and death. The line of poetry actually enacts love, but somehow the margin enacts death. So it's you against the margin all the time" (Jansen 75-76). For Lee, the poet resists the margin, death, by creating a line of poetry, life. By extension, the metaphors of love and death at the end of "This Room" may be understood to depict not only the formation of the corporeal subject, but also the persona's ongoing act of creating lines of poetry to push back against the white margin of the page. The figure and actions of the persona in the room, and the poet and his act of writing "This Room," overlap; the meta-poetic narrative is embedded throughout the text. Consider, for instance, the ambiguity of "the face" in the seventh stanza:

> The sun on the face
> of the wall
> is God, the face

I can't see, my soul, (*City* 50)

"God" or "the face / I can't see," is emergent "on the face / of the wall" as "[t]he sun." Given that the word "face" may be applied to the surface of a page, the figure of the poet-persona "I" may be understood to be struggling to write a line of poetry in the face of the blank page. The "I" trying to see the face of God in the trace of sunshine on the wall may be read as the poet trying to find poetic language to represent the origin of the entities on the face of a white page. The way "each thing / standing for a separate idea" and each separate idea gathers together into "those ideas forming the constellation / of my greater idea" (*City* 50; eighth stanza) describes not only the process of thought, but also the way words gather together and constellate the poetic text "This Room." Let us ask, furthermore, where "*This* Room" (emphasis added) is located, considering that the adjective "this" indicates objects close at hand. "This Room" designates the room in which the narrator-protagonist lives, but it also signifies the poetic text itself, which is open and immediate before the eyes of both the poet and the reader.

III. Poetic Language and the Corporeal Subject

In Lee's poetry, as I have shown, the mechanism of memory reveals the process of poetic creation, and both memory and poetic creation reveal the fluid corporeal subject-in-process engendered in the never-ending repetitions of emergence and dissolution. At the heart of Lee's understanding lies the fluidity of subjectivity in its susceptibility to memory, as reflected in "Furious Versions":

Memory revises me.
Even now a letter
comes from a place
I don't know, from someone
with my name
and postmarked years ago,
while I await
injunctions from the light
or the dark;
I wait for shapeliness
limned, or dissolution.
Is paradise due or narrowly missed

until another thousand years? (*City* 14)

The subject, "I," is revised by memory, which like "a letter / [. . .] postmarked years ago" suddenly draws the self, "me," into the tension between the past and the present. In that moment, the narrator sensuously feels his subjectivity pending between "shapeliness / limned, or dissolution." Inevitably, in Lee's view, the revision of subjectivity through that tension accords with the very moment of poetic creation, to which the narration turns in the next stanza: "on a page a poem begun, something / about to be dispersed, /something about to come into being" (*City* 15). The emergence of the corporeal subject and the creation of poetry are inseparably linked, in that both are pending between "shapeliness" and "dissolution."

The interplay between the subject and poetry also informs "In the Beginning." "A woman" in the beginning who founds time and turns the world is a projection of Lee's image of the poet. This primordial woman is pending between "a lover's *yes* and *no*, / stay and go, singing stepping / in and out of time and momentum" (*Book of My Nights* 44). That is, repetitions of emergence and dissolution create poetic language as they do the world. In his 2007 revision of the original 2001 poem, the third stanza identifies "World" with "Mind": "She says World and Mind / arise simultaneously. Mind, she says, / begun out of nothing" (*From Blossoms* 118). Here, more clearly, the "Mind" of the linguistic agent takes shape through the performance of linguistic acts.

What, then, is the correlation between poetic language and the corporeal self? In approaching this question, I would like to return to the relationship of memory, autobiography, and ethnic identity in Lee's work, and the emphasis on ethnic identity that has characterized readings of "Persimmons." Lee's comments in an interview about his memoir,[6] *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* reveal his conception of memory:

I firmly believe that there is a layer of memory that's personal memory. Behind that,

[6] The genres of autobiography and memoir are conventionally regarded as distinct. Huang explains, "the former is a connected narrative of the author's life stories with an emphasis on introspection, whereas the latter deals, at least in part, with public events and well-known personages other than the author" ("Be/coming" 8). However, as Kingston's work concertedly challenges the distinctions between these and other genres, Lee's prose work breaks down the prose/poetry distinction. The term Davis employs, "life writing," which encompasses autobiography and biography, is appealing, but I here employ the terminology of the general reviewer, using the term "memoir" for Lee's prose.

> there's something like race memory. I'm interested in getting through the personal memories to experience that bigger memory, that memory of the race. That's the job of an artist, to find personal significance but also the huge collective significance. And a lot of that is remembering—remembering what we are. That we're not just our personal history. We're not just who we are in this life span. We're something older. It's in ourselves, our bones. (Kirkpatrick 109)

Following his belief that "race memory" underlies the "personal memory" or "personal history" of the individual, Lee understands the job of the artist to be "getting through the personal memories to that bigger [. . .] memory of the race." Lee's notion of "race memory" as something "huge, collective," and beyond personal history recalls Rey Chow's observation that "the autobiographical tendency in immigrant writing [. . .] takes as its point of reflection the history of the entire group rather than any single individual's life" (144). Chow observes that the creation of immigrant writings like the excerpt from Lee's memoir in *Under Western Eyes: Personal Essays from Asian America,* edited by Garrett Hongo, is both personal and "simultaneously writing collectively about the inherited, *shared* condition of social stigmatization and abjection" (146); Chow's observation is true of Lee to the extent that in writing about personal memories, he aims to address a larger, collective memory, but for Lee, the collective memory is not limited to that of an ethnic group apart from the mainstream of Eurocentric America. Rather than writing about the "inherited [. . .] condition of social stigmatization and abjection" that Chow argues is characteristic of ethnically marked writers, Lee's "remembering" aims beyond both personal history and that of his ethnic group to connect with the memory of the human race.[7]

Asked in an interview about the "dichotomy" between his "writ[ing] very autobiographical poems—using [him]self, [his] wife, [his] children as main characters" and his ambition of "writ[ing] to a state of nobody-hood," Lee replies that "[t]he subject of my poems is the voice in the poem [. . .] not the figures that adorn the voice" (Dearing and Graber 88). Lee explains further, "It's almost as if what I'm saying is the ostensible subject is the father, the mother, whatever is in that poem, but the deeper subject is the voice" (88-89). Lee's notion of "the voice" is key here. In the same interview, Lee draws a contrast between "the voice" and "the words": "[y]ou don't have to hear the words. You can hear the rhythms, the

[7] For Lee's comments on his interest in a dialogue not with cultural existence but with "his truest self" or "God," see Marshall.

harmonies, the disharmonies, in the voices and sentences. [. . .] those naked voices, are more interesting to me than the words" (88). In Lee's explanation, "words" represent the specific meanings of individual speech, whereas "the voices" convey the touch or emotion of speech, something like the original cause underlying particular words. The emotion of speech emerges when the surface of specific and logical meanings is stripped from words, and speech is left naked. The "naked" voice in a line of poetry exposes the productive urge of speech. This elemental, creative power lying behind the specific elements of personal memory can be shared universally.

In addition to "the voice," Lee uses the terms "poetic speech" or "poetic language" to refer to this power (Kirkpatrick 101). As Lee considers his memoir *The Winged Seed* to be a two-hundred-page "long prose poem" (110), and certain prose works of Faulkner, Melville, and Woolf to be "poetry" (Jansen 78; Kirkpatrick 110), his conception of poetry cannot be defined in conventional stylistic terms. To distinguish "poetic speech" from ordinary speech, Lee invokes "that manifold quality of speech" (Kirkpatrick 102). Whereas in ordinary speech "[w]e're talking very linearly, and it's clear that one person is speaking to the other people," in poetic speech "the center of it keeps shifting, and the audience isn't always clear" (101). For Lee, poetic language is distinguished by a manifoldness of being wherein all of our being speak; this understanding recalls the postmodern conception of poetic language as characterized by heterogeneity or polyphony.[8] More significantly, in Lee's understanding, poetic language tends intrinsically to transcend specificities, no matter how personally "autobiographical" elements are described in a poem. The purpose of the creating self of the poet is to get through the personal elements to the cause of the creation of the poem. In the same interview, moreover, Lee offers a quite sensuous description of the relation between poetic creation and "[d]esire and passion":

> [An artist is] dealing with very ancient, elemental laws, material, and urges: the passion to speak, the passion to be quiet, the passion of inflection, the passion for innuendo. A sentence is a unit of passion. A line of a poem is a unit of passion. A

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[8] For more on the theory of heterogeneity and polyphony in poetic language, see Kristeva. Like Kristevan semiotic theory, much of contemporary Asian American criticism is indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin in its conception of textual heterogeneity. Such critics as Partridge and Zhou make reference to Bakhtin in their readings of Lee's "The Cleaving" (see Partridge 112, 122-23; Zhou, "Inheritance" 123-29).

poem is embodied passion. (Kirkpatrick 102)

Lee's moving description of a line of a poem as "a unit of passion" resonates with his dramatizing of the inseparable relationship between the corporeal subject and the creation of poetic language as the interplay of emergence and dissolution, of love and death, in "This Room." Lee's poetic language enacts this interplay, performing what Barbara Johnson describes as "[poetic] language's hovering on the threshold between life and death, between pleasure and its beyond, between restorative and abusive repetition" (97).

Conclusion

Lee offers the comment, "what I really wanted to do [in writing *The Winged Seed*] was to blacken a page with words" (*Indiana Review* 120), a statement that may lead to the misunderstanding that if the writer only produces a series of words, indulging the creative impulse to write, poetic language can emerge, and hence, that Lee's autobiographical motifs have no intrinsic role in Lee's creation of poetic language. My point is not that Lee's autobiographical narrative is unimportant to his poetics. Autobiography is central to Lee's pursuit of poetic language, not as a way of developing the history of his ethnic group by reproducing personal memories, but as a way of telling about his self. The autobiographical first-person narrative enables the association of the poet's self and the protagonist's self in the text; the subject's representation of memory—the present self's narration of the past self—vividly foregrounds the interplay of poetic creation and the corporeal subject-in-process.

Close reading of Lee's poetic texts exposes as simplistic the cultural nationalist stance that casts the immigrant poet's personal history as central to ethnic identity, enabling a radical rethinking of contemporary critical approaches that locate Lee's poetry in a framework of diasporic cultural and political struggle. While such approaches, challenging reductive either/or distinctions between the ethnic Asian American and mainstream American, may speak to the subversive power of Lee's work, they fail to engage Lee's poetics in its universal, elemental aims, and indeed its resistance to the politics of diasporic literature. Yet this resistance is a source of Lee's subversive power: "the art of memory" in Lee's poetry upends the reader's expectation of encountering the straightforwardly autobiographical representations, instead immersing the reader in the complex interplay of memory, subject, and poetic language. Lee's profound poetics of the creation of the subject-

in-process, reflected in "the art of memory," may seem apolitical, but in breaking through cultural identity to the universal, it asserts radical political power in textual practice.

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