Double Displacements: Asian American Narratives Outside of the Ancestral and Adopted Homeland

by

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Thesis
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Phnom Penh, Cambodia

In the first week of June, 2018, I arrived in Phnom Penh, at the K-City Hotel, with a group of university nursing students from Hong Kong, who themselves were completing an overseas service project to fulfill a graduation requirement. My role, as university staff, was to document their ongoings and interview various affiliates, and so I talked to the students as they visited homes on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, performing door-to-door health check-ups. I watched as they told families to stretch everyday, take walks, eat less fried foods, cut down on the sodium. I sat down with some local residents, who offered me iced coffee and seemed to enjoy these soft suggestions, laughing as they stretched alongside the students. I crammed this "journalistic" work into a few sweltering days.

The third floor of K-City remained quiet throughout, aside from the continuous hum of motorcycle traffic, and there was no WiFi. For the rest of my time, I laid in bed and watched the Indian Wells tennis tournament announced in French, read all four of Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels*, and drank lots of beer because it was cheaper than bottled water. I wondered why K-City was named as such. I had decided to work in Southeast Asia out of a vague sense of restlessness, but here, resting felt like the most appropriate thing to do.

On the third day, I, along with some other students, pressed the elevator button to go up to the fifth floor to eat breakfast. The light above the elevator came on, but the elevator was going down, so we stood still. As the door opened, I saw a Korean man, a lanky, tan *ahjussi* dressed in an ill-fitting polo and jeans. I saw that he was holding onto a young Cambodian woman. He saw me seeing him, and temporarily lost his grasp on the woman, who tried to walk out of the elevator. *여기 안이야*, *it's not the right floor*, he said gruffly, yoking the woman back
into the elevator and rapidly fussing with its buttons, clearly embarrassed at what has transpired in front of a group of students. The woman did not say anything, nor look at our group. In three seconds he was gone, and in a few more seconds we were on the elevator going up, quiet. No one around me understood Korean. He reminded me of my father.

It was my first week working outside of the United States, and I was presented with an eerie question of choice: would I lean into my Koreanness and present myself as such, or abstain from it and mask myself in my Americanness? This was a question I had dealt with my entire life, as a Korean American, but now I would be forced to reckon with it in its bare entirety.

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Throughout my time in Cambodia, I kept one physical book with me, a material object that grounded me amidst rapid geographic vertigo: Jenny Xie's poetry collection *Eye Level* (2018), a collection filled with Xie's myriad travel tales, one of a Chinese American college graduate wandering the world. Xie's literary commitment was to the capacity and limitations of her own gaze in travel, testing how much she could see in utterly foreign places. However, when I talked to her, Xie said that her experiences were not directly centered around racial identity and racial passing, perhaps owing to, in her words, the different racial milieu in which she attended college. Nevertheless, by constantly checking back to her collection, I began to see Cambodia through a mixture of my own eyes and hers.

In one poem, "Phnom Penh Diptych," Xie writes, "I kept twisting my face in bar bathrooms, / in wet markets, in strangers' arms." I too saw myself as continually performing this
act of "twisting," of contortion as a means to fit into a place, or perhaps I wanted to assume the stance of Xie's poetic narrator. I constantly checked my gait, facial expressions, and etiquette to attempt to match the locals.

Peggy Phelan, a performance scholar at Stanford, conceptualizes this constant contortion as characteristic to identity production in her book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Phelan writes that the self is "continually reproduced and reassured precisely because it fails to secure belief. It fails because it cannot rely on a verifiably continuous history." Reinvention, reproduction, and assimilation is both necessary and intrinsic to Asian Americans, who have spent our lives contorting into an American "I," only to learn that it was an impossibility. I, like other immigrants, am unable to cling onto a sense of "history" because of a fracture between my ancestral Korean history and my adopted American one. It is the question of reinvention that began to crowd my mind as I moved from foreign space to foreign space, constantly thinking and overthinking questions of identity, how I was viewed on the street level.

"There's nowhere to arrive," Xie writes in "Rootless." "I'm just here in my traveler’s clothes, trying on each passing town for size." I never looked for answers to grand ideas like claim, ownership, and arrival in Xie's work, knowing that such answers did not exist. Xie's words never situate themselves in a familiar spatio-temporal grounding, but instead simply float, displaced and dispersed, searching for what traces remain in a world completely interconnected in the extraction and flow of resources, with human migration as its consequence. For Xie, there remains nothing to "discover," nothing to plant her flag on, but there is instead plenty to accumulate and witness and learn, both about herself and about the world around her. As for me,
I spent my time in Cambodia dissatisfied with the loneliness of theorizing gaze and identity, and knew I needed something more to attach myself to, even if this was a futile task.

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In the 21st century, after centuries of European and American travel-colonialism marketed as travelogues and popular entertainment, and following the late 20th century impetus to develop a "post-colonial" form of travel writing, the world has seen a concomitant rise of travelers not journeying from West to East (two fraught terms I will be employing for the sake of simplicity), but from the East to the West—today, China is now the world's top tourism spender.

However, I did not travel from East to West. West is not "home" in the sense of having ancestral roots, nor is East "home," because these roots are pulled out through migration, but it is somewhere in the middle, or, more plausibly, somewhere that does not fully exist, or is not yet fully realized. Poets like Xie hint at the question that if America cannot be home, and East Asia cannot either, where does that leave us? Globalism scholar Arjun Appadurai characterizes this as "a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models." It is no longer a simple colonizer/colonized binary, nor a voyeur/local one. It is in this milieu of globalization that the question of why numerous Asian American writers, like Xie, have gone abroad, have come into stark relief.

Lyric poetry, more so than travel writing, thus makes sense as a suitable form to equip both reader and writer to understand both world and self, especially as demarcations between the two become more confused. As Janet Gunn writes, autobiography, or in this case, the lyric
"eye/I," is not conceived as "the private act of a self writing" but as "the cultural act of a self reading." In a country like Cambodia, where Western influences are a haunting specter, and Eastern influences are new and foreboding, *Weird Ethnography* can be a subtitle to this poetic exercise, where there is neither in-group nor out-group, just floating East Asian immigrants all around, a few peering in with English fluency and sharp eyes.

However, let me first qualify the two words, "Asian American," an entire continent imposed upon a country. I am referring to largely coastal, second generation, and relatively privileged East Asian Americans. I mean what scholar Elaine Kim describes as "today's Asian immigrant teenager," as opposed to "yesterday's young Asian immigrant":

Yesterday’s young Asian immigrant might have worked beside his parents on a pineapple plantation in Hawaii or in a fruit orchard on the Pacific Coast, segregated from the mainstream of American life. Today’s Asian immigrant teenager might have only Asian friends, but she probably deals daily with a not necessarilyanguishing confusion of divergent influences, a collision of elements she needs to negotiate in her search to define herself.

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As a kind of orientation to the city, the Hong Kong students and I were shuttled around Phnom Penh, shown this place and that, and I noticed that the swankier neighborhoods bore signs reminiscent of my childhood in Southern California: *Tours les Jours, Paris Baguette, La Boulangerie*. No one else recognized the absurdity of seeing these Korean, faux-French bakery franchises in Cambodia, which meant that their French names, their French pastries, and their workers in berets and breton shirts had done their jobs. I wondered how self-aware the irony of
Of all countries, South Korea has the second highest FDI (foreign direct investment) flowing into Cambodia, spending $4.5 billion in the last 25 years, specifically in the food, cosmetics, and energy industries. There are 300 Korean firms currently operating in the country, presumably in an effort to tap into Cambodia's 7% annual GDP growth. Or perhaps to stave off the impending hegemony of China's Belts and Roads being laid down across the world. Or perhaps to just get into the game that is the Rising Southeast Asia. And here I took a small part, patronizing hotels and restaurants, taking taxis, and marking English onto a country that seems voracious for more of it.

After around ten days, the Hong Kong students left for a village a few hundred kilometers to the west, but I stayed a few days longer, having done all my necessary reportage. The first morning in which I appeared at the hotel breakfast alone, the sole waiter spoke to me after serving me a fried egg. "Do you want sexy time?" he asked, and without giving me time to respond, shoved his phone screen into my face and begins swiping, swiping, swiping through pictures of skinny, young, and naked Cambodian women. Flustered, I blushed and said no thank you but he continued to swipe, perhaps unwilling to stop, or maybe just unable to believe that I was not a sex tourist. I wonder if he had forgotten that he had served me the same, single fried egg sunny side up for the past ten days, and that I had always eaten with a group of students in bright purple university shirts, eager to continue our voluntourism.

What "K-City" meant began coming into relief. I saw on my phone that according to a 2013 survey done by the Korean Institute of Criminology, Korean sex tourists were the number
one source of demand for sex with minors in Southeast Asia. Growing up, when people asked me if I felt more Korean or more American, I did not answer them, but in this moment I also did not want to answer them, preferring to think about something else. The next morning, I saw the waiter, but did not ask for an egg. Clinging to Americanness is something I had never done, but in this instance I would have liked to do so.

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For the next year and a half, I kept coming back to Xie, kept mining her words to possibly arrive at my own. Almost an entire year later, while in England, I coincidentally landed upon another exploration of Cambodia, this time in Celina Su's 2018 collection Landia, and I was taken back to everything I had both seen and failed to see. Su is marketed as an "Asian American poet," but this denies the complexity of her reality: her parents moved from China to L.A. to Panama to Curaçao to São Paulo, and she currently is a professor of urban studies in New York.

Su opens up her poem, "The Incessant of Travel (Day 1)," with this simple line: "I unravel in Phnom Penh." I was transported back to my time in Cambodia through just five words.

For Su, the made-up name of her book, Landia, represents "an in-between place. It’s one personal manifestation of the sort of literal and figurative borderlands that I’m so obsessed with." The collection, as a whole, took me through the velocity of the contemporary world, where borders become porous for the economically privileged. Su's words echo that of anthropologist
James Clifford, who, in his *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, brings up the pivotal question that for the contemporary traveler: "everyone is more or less permanently in transit […] Not so much ‘Where are you from?’ as ‘Where are you between?’” Su and Xie are never, will never be able to situate themselves outside of the "in-between," because of their always, already interpellated racial identity as Asian American who are simultaneously inside and outsider. Su and Xie's poems pointed me to more questions than answers: we are privileged sightseers, undoubtedly, but do we look in with American eyes? Chinese diasporic eyes? Korean eyes? Is this even the right question to be asking?

But nevertheless I remained, fixated on the "I." Su, instead, carefully "unravels" not only her own lyric "I," but the land she steps foot on, and diverges from Xie in this investigation of spatial history. Su is acutely cognizant of the legacies of trauma that surround her in Cambodia: a young, spry country still reeling from massive US bombing campaign during the Vietnam War and the ensuing Pol Pot dictatorship. She carefully escapes both categorization as complicit American, for she is not (fully), and as a victim of American imperialism, for she is not (fully). Yet it is this cognizance of history that I craved, one that not only saw, like Xie, but saw through into structures and memories and histories. In "The Incessant of Travel," Su witnesses,

A panoply of torture devices illuminated by incandescent signs, prayed upon by touring evangelicals evoking God's will in the guest book, a high percentage of missing limbs, succulent mines.

Su comments on the numerous tourist offerings in Phnom Penh, a form of palatable "dark tourism" in which visitors steep themselves in torture prisons and mass graves while distancing themselves as inheritors of the Vietnam War. "Prey" become morphed into "pray," and missionaries come not just bringing the good news, but a sense of exploitation. Su carefully
performs a "vertical," rather than a "horizontal" experience of travel, in which instead of simply moving from place to place, intaking sights and wonders, she digs deep into the roots of a particular space, whether through exploring spatial memory, individual memory, or just by picking apart the different nuances of such a place.

To look back in time for a moment, in the two millennia long tradition of Chinese travel writing, those journeying across the country frequently inscribed poems directly onto physical landscapes like mountains and cliffs, or wrote on the walls of a famous site or on wooden panels hanging on these walls. Poetry thus did not only serve as a recollection of travel, but became physically embedded within the contours of traveled lands, albeit lands less marked by geopolitical boundaries than today. Poetry was place, and words became just as vital in shaping environment as environment was in shaping itself. Su's poetry does this better than Xie's, but for me, an English speaker, these books may as well be writing on walls, guiding me through Cambodia, as well as inheriting a legacy of literature unbeholden to the Western Canon.

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When I joined up with my white coworkers during our copious amounts of downtime, Cambodians always assumed I was some native informant, and spoke to me in their local tongue. I was expected to order for the group at restaurants, and often disappointed waiters, who looked at me with slight disdain as I resorted to a pointing and guessing game with the menu. In my own words, and in the words of almost every person I meet, I look Chinese-ish, so I am able to racially pass in most of East and Southeast Asia quite fluidly without being immediately
conceived of as an outsider. Tash Aw, a Malaysian novelist living in London, has written about this ambiguity in his memoir *The Face*:

> It has to do with my face. My features are neutral, unpronounced, my skin tone changeable—pale in sunless, northern climates but tanning swiftly within a day or two of arriving in the tropics. My face blends into the cultural landscape of Asia: east of India, my identity becomes malleable, molding itself to fit in with the people around me.

In this tenuous moment of racial inclusion, and out of my own pride, I attempted to separate myself from my coworkers, let go of my tourist, expat privilege, and slide into an invisibility taken for granted by locals. I sometimes passed as a local in Cambodia, yes, but once I was hailed by anyone in Cambodia, once I opened up my phone to Google Translate, called a rickshaw driver, attempted to interview someone, or even just said *hello*, my mask came off, and invisibility became hypervisible.

Nevertheless, I still visited Phnom Penh's two most highly reviewed tourist sites, the S-21 Prison (4.5 stars, 12,247 reviews on TripAdvisor) and the Killing Fields (4.5 stars, 12,208 reviews on TripAdvisor), squeezing into small jail cells and circling around graves, listening to the audio guide explain just how the Pol Pot regime brutally tortured and killed its dissidents, interspersed with soft muzak. In these hot summer rains, I found myself heaving.
Xie attempts to make an explicit separation between herself, an expatriate, and other "Westerner" tourists, which proves to be a fraught exercise:

The tourists curate vacation stories, days summed up in a few lines.

Killing fields tour, Sambo the elephant,
In clotted street traffic,
dusky-complexioned children hesitant in their approach.

But is this not what Xie does as poet, recap days in a few lines? Except instead of lines on famous tourist attractions, lines contemplating the clichedness of such tourist attractions? Is one more moral than the other? Surely, neither Su nor Xie are the stereotypical American tourists in gaudy garb, but as Su writes, they are similarly privileged, with "A university degree, a couple of successful grant proposals, but mostly my passport." Privilege is not racial here, but undoubtedly
exists through the freedom of mobility, and it is remarkable how similar my own path has been: entering a university, obtaining funds from that institution to go abroad, and then utilizing the prestige of this institution to further launch myself into any space for my own intellectual development. And of course, this is all made possible through my US passport.

Xie, however, is very self aware of her privilege. In an interview with *BOMB Magazine*, she said, "being an expat can encourage a false sense of ownership over a place—perhaps partly devised in opposition to the tourist—that can feed into a sense of cultural arrogance." Ownership over a place, an identity, a culture, is something I certainly have never felt, and perhaps Xie feels the same way, tugged into a yearning for ownership while realizing the impossibility of its demands. It's easy to say that I have no relation to the American Flag, to the bald eagle, to the Star Spangled Banner, but I will also go as far to say that I have equally no connection with Chinese Exclusion, or Japanese Incarceration, or the Vietnam War. In my opinion, the fundamental characteristic of Asian Americanness is that it has taken on more identities, more cultures, than it can possibly hold. And so instead of attaching myself to systems and nationalities, I place my identity in other writers, like Xie and Su.

Thus, when theorizing myself in Cambodia within an Asian Americanness that holds rather haphazardly, I am brought to the ideas Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, and his seminal idea of the "hail," or racial interpellation. For Althusser, there is no individual, only subjects who come into identity by being "called out" by "ideological state apparatuses," or places like schools, churches, and families. He uses the example of a police officer saying, "Hey, you there!" after which the individual turns around and answers the call, becoming a subject to the structure of authority the officer represents. To add to Althusser's ideas in regards to Asian
Americanness, Jennifer Ann Ho, in *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, adds a dimension of contemporary confusion over this hail: "Ambiguity most centrally marks Asian Americans because they have been variously and multiply interpreted: they are neither wholly accepted into white privilege nor fully subjected to institutional discrimination."

And so I mentally bring myself back to K-City hotel, right before the elevator closes. I am a Korean American who worked for a Hong Kong university in Cambodia, but none of this matters. The man saw me, perhaps recognizing me as Korean, perhaps not. The woman saw us, recognizing my group as tourists, most likely. Our group looks at each other, perhaps already desensitized to the fact that sex tourism is rampant and normal. And we continue on, doing our service projects and visiting sites of atrocity in order to emotionally reestablish our power, our primacy over developing Asian nations. Racial ambiguity, in this sense, shields me from being picked out and put on the spot, although this is something I will never stop wanting.
The Killing Fields

About a year after I left Cambodia, South Korean Prime Minister Moon Jae-In visited Cambodia as part of his "New Southern Policy" to visit all ten members of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) by the end of his term. His consolidated slogan was the 3 P's: "People, Prosperity, and Peace." Fifty years ago, Korean President Park Chung Hee sent 300,000 troops into Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, fighting on the side of the United States. I wonder if Prime Minister Moon thinks about this at all, because I certainly do, and wonder if I am doubly complicit, not complicit at all, or something entirely different.

Later on that first day after the Hong Kong students left for the countryside, I swiped around on Google Maps for food. I discovered, first, several churches with English names like Children of Life Church, or the Way of Life Church. I was curious, and when I tapped these locations for more information, I saw smiling Korean faces surrounded by smiling Cambodian faces. Soon after, I found two Korean restaurants mere blocks away, literally sitting across the street from each other: Mekong Korean Restaurant to the west, and 사랑체 (Sarangchae, or in English, love) to the east. K-City was to the south of both, geographically forming an acute triangle with the two restaurants.

I exclusively ate at these restaurants for the next four days, alternating between the two for lunch and dinner. I ordered quietly, hesitant in my broken Korean, and left quickly, unable to be the resting point of every other diners' gaze for very long. Nevertheless, it felt good to take advantage of how cheap the food is here, and I enjoyed the ambient Korean spoken around me.
Looking around, Mekong Restaurant had many wooden crosses, wall calendars with church logos, and small children. Sarangchae had small groups of men huddled around bottles of soju. Ironically, it was reassuring to see 보신탕, or dog stew (*boshintang*), carried out frequently from both kitchens, even though they largely do not serve it in Seoul anymore due to societal pressures. I thought of my grandfather eating the stew every single day (the dish is widely believed to enhance virility), sitting at the head of the table, hushing the family into an austere, Presybetarian silence. I thought of my grandmother, who wordlessly slipped between kitchen and dining room, filling up my grandfather's bowl when needed. On Sarangchae's menu, the stew is described in English as "Soup of low fat meat with various Korean herbs as a wholesome food for summer season." I ordered everything else on the menus.

During my last lunch at Mekong, my last day in Cambodia, I was the only customer. The Cambodian waitresses lined the restaurant's walls and sulked, while the Korean owner sat behind the counter and fanned himself. While eating, I read one Google review of the restaurant which stated, "한국서 먹는것 같아 좋아요." *It feels like I am eating in Korea, so I like it.* I slipped away silently, saying *thank you* in Korean just loud enough for me to hear.

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In an ideal world, one devoid of fear and marginality, I would have chatted with the restaurant owners in Korean, told them I was *a Korean person raised in the States, here for work, willing to help translate materials if wanted.* Jenny Xie, as a representative that can speak both Asia and America, was asked to do such a thing in Phnom Penh, in "Phnom Penh Diptych":

*Can you fix this English?*
the Chinese restaurant owner asks, pushing a menu toward me [...] 

I translate what little I can, it’s embarrassing.

*Just passing through?*

asks his eldest daughter, as she turns away to the fan

In my first trip to Mekong Korean Restaurant, I went up to the Korean manager and asked for 병에 있는 물 or *water in a bottle*, as I could not drink the tap water. The lady looked into my eyes for a five straight seconds, and then waved me off, rattling off in Cambodian to one of the servers. I did not know whether the manager had understood what I had said, but a few moments later, I was brought a water in a bottle.

Thirty minutes later, the handwritten bill charged me for 생수, or bottled water. I walked out in a slight feeling of shame, disappointed in my imprecise circumlocution, as well as my inability to get a single phrase right. How could I laugh at these comical English translations, I thought, if I couldn't even speak Korean properly? Growing up, my parents never stopped emphasizing how English is global currency, how being fluent in English is a form of capital millions would yearn for, but in this moment I felt worthless. Peggy Phelan characterizes moments like this as key in forming a sense of identity: "Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly." My identity arises precisely out of failure and inexactitude, of looking one way but being stuck between two languages. Xie too, was in a Chinese restaurant in Cambodia, surrounded by migrant Chinese workers who "chew toothpicks like uncles on both sides of my family," but could not translate, could not maneuver from English into Chinese. She is *just passing through*, with nowhere to arrive.
Xie embodies what Stuart Hall calls "transitional figures," or diasporic intellectuals who are "constantly translating between different languages, different worlds." Xie's writing demonstrates how the tensions of being Chinese American, of straddling two different racial categories, does not become alleviated when outside of her adopted homeland and her ancestral homeland. Rather, it becomes a double displacement, and a sense of stable identity (for Xie, manifesting in a stable gaze, "at eye level") is put even further out of reach, as one doubly diasporic Chinese cannot engage with another diasporic Chinese, just as I could not hold a common ground with the restaurant manager. Muddled language, Konglish and Chinglish and everything in between, becomes our modus operandi.

As verbal language and superficial appearance began to fail me over and over, I began to unload all of my thoughts and insecurities over to my journal. W.G. Sebald, in his 1995 work The Rings of Saturn, elucidates just this desire:

Writing is the only way in which I am able to cope with the memories which overwhelm me so frequently and so unexpectedly. If they remained locked away, they would become heavier and heavier as time went on, so that in the end I would succumb under their mounting weight.

In the tradition of Sebald, as I began a year and a half of constant flux, I began to store everything in journals, hoping to contain frustration and confusion in unlined pages. Writing did not just provide a home, but it prevented me from being homeless, from having a material page onto which I could always come to.
Ha Jin, a Chinese writer-in-exile living in Massachusetts, also approaches the connection between place and writing in his essay collection *The Writer as Migrant*. He writes, "For many migrant writers, homeland is actually their mother tongues, as the German poet Hilde Domin states, 'For me language is impossible to lose, after everything else has been lost. The last, essential home.'" Writing, within the margins of the page, thus creates a bounded space for words to sit, for lives to be membered together. This has been true for fourth century Chin Dynasty poets, for Ha Jin, and now for me.

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When I checked out of K-City a few days later, due to fly back to Hong Kong, I saw a Korean man talking to two young children behind the hotel counter, presumably the owner and his kids. The younger child played with a plastic train set, tip-toeing to scoot it along the front desk. Then I was on the bus. Xie, in *Eye Level*, writes "ni hao in all directions," so I said in return, *Annyeonghaseyo to somewhere else*.

These few months in Southeast Asia launched within me a desire to move my own train set across the world, to continue to meet others at eye level, and to take deep breaths in places where I had absolutely no claim to. I wanted to be something more than a tourist, but did not want to give up any of its privileges.
Tourism
John Chau, American Missionary

My name is John. I love you, and Jesus loves you. Jesus Christ gave me authority to come to you. On November 16th, 2018, John Chau, a 26 year old missionary, shouted these words from his kayak out towards the men standing on the shore of North Sentinel Island. As Chau got off his kayak and waded closer to the island, the Sentinelese shot at him with bows and arrows, one of which pierced through his waterproof Bible. Chau rushed back into his boat and paddled back towards his local aides, Karen Christians from neighboring islands.

I love you, and Jesus loves you. It is illegal to visit North Sentinel Island, due to the Sentinelese’s historic hostility towards outside encroachment. Chau set up a triangular relationship between the Sentinelese, Jesus, and himself. It is this triangulation that was fated from years prior, when John was called by God to go to these people, never mind the fact that they did not speak any English. The you, that Chau could've placed on anybody, anywhere in the world, had fallen on this remote, violently insular group of individuals just trying to be left alone.

Jesus Christ gave me authority to come to you. Chau ventured out again, knowing full well that they most likely would not warm up to him this second time around: he wrote these words to his friend Alex the previous night: "I think I might die. I’ll see you again, bro—and remember, the first one to heaven wins." That morning, the fishermen dropped Chau off. The next day, they drew back to the island, only to see Sentinelese men dragging a body with a rope tied around its neck.

John Chau became a man known only in the way that he died. His death caused international controversy and ridicule, within both Christian and non-Christian circles. Think pieces, investigative reports, and blog posts flooded the internet that month, and the tenor of all
rang similar: descriptors like *naive*, *brainwashed*, and *foolish* became ubiquitous in describing Chau.

I became flustered and uncomfortable at this coverage. It is a rarity to see an Asian American male face plastered all over the news. And when I do see faces like mine, it is either bland celebrity coverage and identity politicking (Henry Golding, John Cho), slight condescension (Andrew Yang), or something really horrible (Seung Hui Cho). If anything, I was taken back to 2012’s “Linsanity,” a two week period in which the Harvard educated, devoutly Christian Jeremy Lin came out of nowhere and took the New York Knicks to a blazing seven game win streak. Yet unlike Linsanity, a unified "win" amongst Asian Americans, the death of Chau caused something completely different.

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Chau was born on December 18th, 1991, the third child of a Chinese psychiatrist father and a white lawyer mother, and grew up in the lush woods of Vancouver, Washington. Yet in 2009, just as Chau was about to leave for college, his father was arrested by the DEA for illegally prescribing opioids. This, according to Doug Bock Clark, who reported extensively on Chau for *GQ*, eventually pushed John to pursue a life of both radical Christianity and solo outdoorismanship, away from the confines of his home. That year, Chau headed off to his father's own alma mater, Oral Roberts University, an Evangelical university in Tulsa, Oklahoma that sends a seventh of its student body abroad on missions. After his freshman year, Chau felt his
calling from God, commenting on a missionary blog, “Hi! I genuinely believe that God has called me to go to the Sentinelese." He then began working earnestly for this goal.

There is no doubt that John Chau believed in the absolute truth of Jesus's "Great Commission" in Matthew 28:19, that he had to "go and make disciples of all nations," and thus joined a community of people who do extreme, often undercover missionary work in the "10/40 Window," a region between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator that holds most of the world's Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Between 2015 and 2016, Chau made four trips to the Andaman Islands, making contacts in the local Christian community. In 2017, Chau attended a missionary training course with the All Nations program. The finale of this program consisted of Chau taking hours to hike in an area south of Kansas City, and then facing a mock up tribal village in which "locals" (dressed up Americans) threatened to kill him and spoke in an unintelligible language. The international executive director of All Nations told the *New York Times* that Chau was "one of the best participants in this experience that we have ever had."

Unlike these national publications, what I saw in the media, perhaps at the risk of projecting my own self onto Chau, is a particular brand of Asian American assimilation, perhaps the brand of assimilation, that seeks to decenter the uniqueness of race for the sameness of professional achievement. This de-racializing racialization is all too common among Asian Americans, the model minority that has excelled in American education, industry, and for Chau, religion. There is an excellence that Chau strived for, only attainable by reaching the most unreachable people group in the world, an excellence that matches that of his immigrant doctor father in degree, but transposed onto a Christian landscape. With his small, 5' 6" frame and his ambiguous racial features, Chau was able to hit the upper limits of his own mobility and
aloneness in the world: he spent his early 20's roaming from national park to national park, country to country, possibly looking for something that he couldn't find in the United States.

John Chau is someone who I, a Korean American, Christian, college-aged male, could've seen myself become. John Chau exemplifies the conditions of what if so often feels like to belong to be Asian American, to belong to nowhere and to be beholden to nothing. Yet this is not just about his race but also his masculinity, shown through his idealism, and his religion, as Chau embodied a sense of exploration and travel that he only thought could last within a Christian paradigm, that evangelical mission was the only way to live fruitfully in foreignness.

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Like John Chau, I too went on an overseas mission trip after my freshman year of high school. Unlike Chau, and hundreds of thousands of American Christians, I had no such conviction of a "calling," nor did I have faith that my presence overseas could change anybody other than myself. At fourteen, I believed in God, but fell asleep in church every week. It was the fall of 2012, and my dad had asked me to come with him to Thailand over the next summer. It would be for two weeks, right in the middle of our two month family exodus to South Korea. "Why do I have to do this?" I constantly asked my dad, but he had already made up his mind.

The San Diego Korean Presbyterian Church mission team started off with five: the austere senior pastor of our church, my dad, myself, an older woman, and a middle aged man. We would be spreading God's light into a country where approximately one percent of the population is Christian. Evangelism efforts in Thailand had been going on for over half a
millennia, ever since Portugese colonizers arrived in the 1550's. American Protestant efforts began in earnest in 1828, as Congregationalists were followed by Baptists who were followed by Presbytarian. In Korea, Christianity only arrived in the late 1800's, but less than a century later, in 1970, Korean missionaries began flooding into Southeast Asia, building churches like the ones I saw in Phnom Penh. Now, I guessed, Korean Americans would be coming to Thailand too.

In our preparation meetings, our team solely spoke Korean, and I hardly chimed in. We prayed over Jesus's Great Commission, believing in the responsibility of the Korean church to finish the task that the decaying American church could not. However, the older woman and the middle aged man dropped out of the team, and my dad remained convinced that he, that we, would go. I was not aware that my dad's missional convictions ran this deep, nor really knew anything about what religion meant to him. Or maybe this wasn't about conviction at all: perhaps he did not want to disappoint the pastor like the others had. Or maybe my father, who never enjoyed being at home or staying put, also wanted to explore a new corner of the world.

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Chau's heart had been set for years on the North Sentinel Island, which the neighboring Onge people, part of the overarching Andamanese people group, call Chia daaKwokweyeh. The number of Sentinelese today is approximated to be around 100-150 people. Like in so many other parts of the Global South, new diseases introduced by British expeditions in the late 18th century, such as measles, pneumonia, and influenza, wiped out the vast majority of the population. After the Sentinelese violently resisted further colonization, the British responded by
creating penal colonies on Andaman lands, encroaching even further on indigenous lands. In the 1940's, even the Japanese bombed the islands. However, in 1991, a team of Indian anthropologists led by Madhumala Chattopadhyay peacefully engaged with the Sentinelese, and passed along gifts like coconuts. As a whole, however, virtually nothing is known about the Sentinelese people outside of this sparse contact with outsiders. Perhaps this impossibility is what drew Chau in, this idea that he could join a history that no one had successfully entered.

The place of my birth, Korea, has also been historically labeled a "hermit kingdom," the inevitable result of being surrounded by Russia, China, and Japan, with nowhere to flee but inwards. Koreans have suffered so much that there is even a collective word to describe our intergenerational grief, han, the result of centuries of attempted takeover, Japanese colonization, a civil (proxy) war, and a string of authoritarian governments. Our blood is coarse and fast flowing, brimming with anger and alcoholism and xenophobia, because it is a survival instinct, a desire for simple self-sovereignty, once and for all. Now, even American liberals love to demonize North Korea as one of the last "hermit kingdoms," which really means that Americans, of all races, are unwilling to let go of any place in the world that is unchecked by their own sense of ideological superiority — Jacques Derrida calls this a superimposing "white mythology." If it is in this, only this, can I at least begin to understand why the Andamanese killed Chau.

It is easy to label John Chau as assimilating into what Teju Cole calls a “White-Savior Industrial Complex,” one in which well intentioned westerners blithely go on humanitarian missions to have “a big emotional experience that validates privilege.” However, the contemporary world of Christian evangelism is much more complicated than mere imperialism. It was only a few decades ago when Pyongyang was called "The Second Jerusalem," and today,
South Korea commissions 30,000 missionaries annually, falling only second in numbers to the United States. In fact, missionaries to Korea in the early 20th century aided Koreans in their independence struggle against Japanese colonialism, which helped the rapid dissemination of the faith.

Now, the global mission field is much more complicated than a simple binary of West to East. Nearly half of the top 10 countries that send the most missionaries abroad are outside of the traditional bastions of Christianity: India, Brazil, the Philippines, Mexico. Korean missionaries now go to UCLA, the Rust Belt, and New York City alongside China and the Dominican Republic. There is a common Korean saying that states that when the Chinese arrive in a new place, they establish a restaurant; when the Japanese arrive, a factory; and when the Korean arrives, a church.

In my own church, there is a ten foot tall map of the world that stretches across a wall in the church foyer. On this map are numerous red pins delineating where the church's sponsored missionaries lie: Russia, Mexico, China, Cambodia, Thailand. Red yarn is tied around these pins, directing viewers to pictures of each missionary's family, a smiling set of Korean eyes. The parents are Korean American and the kids are continually displaced, third culture kids who attend international schools. S.C. Moon, the director of the Korea Research Institute for Missions, told the New York Times, "Western missionaries tend to carry a sense of guilt because of their imperialist past, but Koreans don't have that historical baggage, and they are not inhibited in reaching out to people with the Gospel. So in their missionary work, they tend not to consult the local people, but make decisions in one direction."
Thus, John Chau can be seen as the apotheosis of a globalization teeming with the internationalism of religion: Christianized Chinese immigrant father meets white mother, child grows up in the Pacific Northwest, attends college in the South, and then decides to go to an island group off the coast of India. “I’m in awe of how GREAT our God is,” Chau wrote in his journal a few days before his death. “Even my heritage points to you—me, an American citizen, part Irish, part Native American (Choctaw) part African, and part Chinese and Southeast Asian—thank you Father for using me, for shaping me and molding me to be your ambassador.”

Ien Eng, in his On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West, could essentially be writing about Chau himself: "the peculiar meanings of diasporic Chineseness are the result of the irreducible specificity of diverse and heterogeneous hybridizations in dispersed temporal and spatial contexts." For Eng, there is too much cross fertilization, too much migration, to even begin to start the taxonomic process of classification, of ordering things, of establishing hierarchies. Chau genetically embodies the conditions of globalized diaspora, and perhaps even predicts its future.

Missionaries have been traveling to the Andaman Islands for over 500 years, but it seems fitting that Chau is its 21st century iteration. Where can someone whose identity is a little bit of everything find a home and a purpose? It seemed like Chau tested this hypothesis to its furthest extent—in his journal, Chau expressed that he hoped to live with the Sentinelese for decades, learning their language and teaching them about the ways of Christ. Chau was by no means "irrational" or "delusional" for dying as the media portrayed him to be. In Chau's view, if he died he went to heaven. If he lived he had the chance to bring more people to heaven. In Evangelical circles especially, there is constant emphasis on "complete surrender," on "picking up your own
"cross daily," meaning that if you call yourself a Christian, you are either all in, or not a Christian at all. Thus, Chau, in his own belief, was by no means "irrational" or "delusional" for dying as the media portrayed him to be. The only irrational and delusional parts of his thinking were that he could quarantine himself for a few weeks, come into contact with the Sentinelese, and somehow not spread virulent diseases to the uncontacted tribe.

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On our first night in Bangkok, a sweaty, jetlagged July night, we stayed in what was described to me as a "four star hotel," which surprised me (I had expected to suffer). During the next day or so, I played with Thai schoolchildren in the church and gawked at how cheap the food was. They were not concerned that I could not speak Thai, nor seemed curious that I wasn't Thai. They just wanted to beat me in ping pong.

The first night would be our last night in a hotel. The next day, we then drove in a minivan north into the countryside, through fields and fields and staring strangers. We spent most of our time driving across the country. I do not remember anything from these long drives, but for some reason vividly remember listening to the entirety of Kanye West's album *Yeezus* over and over again, which had just come out.

My father and I did nothing other than serve as spectators to the evangelical travel industry. Because our team was so small, and had an actual pastor, the roles were very defined: the Korean missionary shuttled us around the country, organizing all the logistics, and the pastor gave the sermons during the night, usually in small homes that doubled as churches. Generally,
from Korean people I know who have been on overseas mission trips, which is to say the
majority of people at my church, the church teams usually split up into different groups and visit
different villages, often performing skits and running a VBS (Vacation Bible School) for the
children. In my case, I had no stake in any of it. I did, however, contribute some prayers into the
ether.

My one "role," however, was photographing the ongoings of the mission trip. My camera
was my new pebble blue Galaxy S3, with its shining eight megapixel camera, and I took as many
pictures as I could: the wet markets, the children, the chickens, the night gatherings. People
praying, people crying, people praising. The adults did not bat an eye, and the children begged
me to give them my phone.

Jenny Xie opens *Eye Level* with a quote from Antonio Machado which says, "the eye you
see is not / an eye because you see it; / it is an eye because it sees you." What I believed to be an
act of constitution, me taking photos, was really an act of me becoming constituted, formulated
by the gaze of the Thai. And it did not help that practically all of my photos were useless — low
light exposure was awful, and most of the sermons and meetings happened outside at night. But I
continued to snap photos, to attempt to frame into existence why these four Korean immigrant
males found it so necessary to spend thousands of dollars to come and do what we were doing.

Before going to Thailand, I had expected that I would be treated as an outsider, would be
stared at, just as what happened when I wandered around in my neighborhood back in Seoul,
during which I would receive confused expressions. Instead, when I spent the days wandering
around each village I found myself in, I found that no one batted an eye: old couples continued to
fan themselves on the porch, young kids ran around with their sticks. Thai eyes watched me
constantly, but they did not care, which endowed me with the false sense that I was *one of them.*

Now, when thinking back to my time in Thailand, where I bathed in the nonchalance of locals, I understand my 14 year old behavior as a constant archiving of *how* I am seen and *where* I am seen. Tash Aw himself experiences wherever he goes in Asia:

> I wonder if, on some level, I enjoy being mistaken for a local as much as I am frustrated that no one seems to know, or care, where I’m from. In some countries, like Thailand, where I can string a few basic sentences together, I find myself mimicking the local accent, which further confuses people. But it makes them happy, too. Same-same like Thai people, they respond cheerily when my identity is finally revealed. They draw their index finger around their face: my face is their face.

I never had the chance to be interpellated, or hailed, because I was only in the corner, shooting photos out of my smartphone, saying nothing. At this point in my life, I didn't even have the vocabulary to know what being Asian American was; I only viscerally felt a feeling of eyes passing over me, whereas in Seoul, where my skin tone ran fourteen shades darker than everyone else, I had felt eyes searching into me.

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My peers, who had done summer mission trips in countries like India and Mexico, always came back to church tanned and weathered, giving exuberant testimonies of how they saw miracles, people getting healed on the spot, dead arms becoming functional again, cataracts disappearing, demons being driven out of bodies. I saw nothing that summer. I remember trying incredibly hard one night after the sermon, putting my hands on the body of a frail, old man in the hopes that his paralyzed legs would work again. We were all praying together, the pastor, the missionary, my father, and I. Dear God, please heal this man's legs. Dear God, please heal this man's legs. Dear God, please let me believe this is working.
There were no miracles in any village. I wondered if I was the one stopping God from making miracles happen, if my sins were letting the devil have the upper hand. I wondered if it was because of the porn I had been watching while in Korea. Or maybe it was because of the rap music I had been listening to throughout the entire trip, all the "bitches" and "fucks" my mom would always complain about in the car. Or maybe it was because, as I had heard from the adults, Thailand was a black swamp for Christianity, a place where nothing fruitful could grow. A cursed land, I was told by the missionary, replete with *ladyboys*.

In one village, our team ran into a local Peace Corps volunteer, a young white woman who attended the Thai church, but could not understand Thai. I was told to translate for her, perhaps out of pity, as she had never been able to understand a sermon despite dutifully coming by every Sunday. So during the service, our Korean preacher spoke in Korean, the Korean missionary translated into Thai, and I, in the back, whispered English translations into her ear. She nodded eagerly, and expressed much gratitude that she had finally been able to understand a sermon. I, for once, was happy that I had actually done something. In retrospect, I guess I had come to Thailand to help white people who wanted to detach from their whiteness.

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Chau's Instagram account, which has 20,000 followers and 821 photos, is all still available to see — this is the way he will be virtually embodied, even as his physical body decays somewhere on the Sentinel Islands. As I scrolled through his feed immediately after his death, I felt like I was performing an exhumation of Chau's body. Much later, I turned to Sally Wen Mao's 2019 poetry collection *Oculus*, a collection about travel, yes, but a virtual travel made possible by technology: *Before I wake, I peruse the dead girl's live photo feed*. Found in the titular poem "Oculus," Mao writes of watching a nineteen-year-old girl in Shanghai fall to her death, which she set up to become uploaded onto Instagram posthumously. Through Mao's own oculus, the telescope of her iPhone screen, she sees everything of the girl's life, from her curtains to her window view to her bed to the confession she is unable to tell her boyfriend.

As shown on his Instagram, Chau lived vibrantly all across the world, constantly hiking, swimming, camping, flying, and exploring different countries and terrains, exhibiting a rugged
male wanderlust tinged with captions in wonder of God's creation. He was even an Instagram "micro-influencer," sponsored by a jerky brand called Perky Jerky, which he often conspicuously displayed in his photos.

On the surface, I traveled in parallel with Chau, venturing from natural wonder to natural wonder, seamlessly connected by the 9x9 grid on my Instagram page. This is, of course, how much global travel is mediated in the contemporary moment: Sean Smith writes that two 2017 studies found that half of survey respondents using Instagram while on the road had listed the application as a source of inspiration for their trip. When I traveled around Scotland, for example, Instagram told me exactly what mountains to hike, which viewpoints were most photogenic, and how to frame photos others could come across.

During my time in Thailand, I had both gotten my first smartphone and had opened an Instagram account. These photos I had uploaded during the trip reinforce what Thailand was for me: food, taking photos with brown children, gaining social clout through bartering foreignness online. I tagged locations with many Thai words stuffed into them, letting others know that I had pulled away from the US. Often, tourist photos like mine exoticize the country's women, de-historicize historical sites, and frame pristine landscapes as rife for exploration, impressing upon the user a mindset of unfettered exploration, that this place is theirs for the taking. Taken superficially, Chau's Instagram certainly appeared to cast him as the protagonist in Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*.

Indeed, initial reporting accounts used Chau's Instagram account as easy fodder to criticize his life as clueless, patronizing thrill seeking, but Chau wrote in his diary that he had built his social media profile to prevent others from guessing the illegality of his work. Paul
Langley Arthur describes platforms like Instagram as "logistical media," in which filtering systems cater different, personalized viewing experiences to each user, thus rearranging each individual into different spaces and times. We are at whims to algorithms that only give us what we want to see, a truism repeated to death during the 2016 presidential elections.

Nevertheless, the headline photos in places like The Guardian and The Washington Post are of Chau hiking Washington's Cascades Trails, smiling bright into a front facing camera, alone with the wilderness enveloping him. "Undo yourself, let the oculus burn through my clothes, record every mistake I make," Mao writes in "Live Feed," cognizant of the fact that no matter how hard we try to curate our own self presentation on social media, it is ultimately the viewer who has the agency in choosing what to see. Chau's remains are yet to be discovered, but his Instagram posts will perhaps remain alive, forever.

Almost nothing online indicates the fact that John Chau is Chinese American. John Chau attended an evangelical college in Oklahoma whose student body is only 2% Asian. There are two photos Chau uploaded that can help visualize his racialization, because he has indeed been racialized, yet in the subtly nefarious, almost hidden way Asian men often are.

One Instagram photo shows his family, revealing a Chinese grandmother whom he called "NaiNai," the Chinese word for the father's mother. The other displays his father as a child, part of a young artist collective before being sent to a grueling work camp for the next six years as part of Mao's Cultural Revolution. Chau writes in the caption, "Especially thankful this Thanksgiving for a hardworking dad who might be the only doctor in the U.S. who went through the Cultural Revolution, never completed 7th-12th grade, came to the U.S. as a #refugee in the
late 70s, and served in the U.S. Army during Desert Storm. #familyhistory #artistcollective #thanksgiving #oldphotos #history."

There is a long history of Asian Americans assimilating into White America through taking part in our country's military industrial complex: in World War II, for example, Japanese American men made up the 442nd Battalion while their families were sent to concentration camps. Current Asian Congressmembers like Ted Lieu, Tammy Duckworth, and Tulsi Gabbard, all flaunt their military credentials every time they can — I know Lieu, whom I interned for, does this because otherwise he would be mercilessly criticized for being a Chinese threat to America. Chau, with a Chinese father, may have felt the same insecurity.

After Chau's death, his father wrote to Doug Bock Clark, who reported extensively on Chau's life, that "the theology of the Great Commission is the byproduct of Western colonization and imperialization, and not Biblical teaching at all." He stated that people groups who did not follow Western religious terms could still be following the teachings of the Bible. John Chau certainly did not think this way. He certainly believed that people who had not heard the gospel would go to a punitive hell, and acted on this conviction.

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Doug Bock Clark, in his *GQ* feature, concluded, "In all my months of reporting, I never found any evidence that Chau even once questioned his calling. His certainty was so absolute that he was willing to bet not only his life on it but the lives of the Sentinelese." Although Chau certainly did many other things with his life than just prepare for his trip to the Sentinel Islands—he hiked through numerous states, spent time with family and friends, worked abroad, helped out with a refugee soccer league—Clark believes that Chau was singularly committed to living out his life with the *telos* that he would eventually preach to unreached people groups.

I also can't help but sense a feeling of estrangement when thinking of Chau's life, perhaps because it serves as a mirror into myself: “He seemed sort of lonely, despite everything,” Kaleb Graves, a friend of Chau's, told Clark. A sense that he did not wholly belong anywhere as an Asian American, especially not at a predominantly white, evangelical university, where minorities must so often shift the locus of their identities to religion rather than race. A sense that he could not tell the vast majority of people he met what his singular dream was, what he believed his calling to be. Toni Morrison writes that freedom is "to move, to earn, to learn, to be allied with a proverbial letter, to narrate the world," and Chau certainly possessed all of these
things. Yet still he was not free, but perhaps he believed that he could only find this freedom after death.

To bring back to one more Mao poem in *Oculus*, "Electronic Motherland," written in response to the Foxconn Riots in Taiyuan, a large manufacturing base in northern China, she opens by writing, "Some nights I wish to see my mother this way: live, handheld, / a breathing coma in my hands. Digit by digit my hand / comes apart, tissue from phalange, aluminum from bone." Mother is both her mother embodied and her mother country, one that has produced screens for the entire world to gaze into. Mao becomes literally and physically intertwined with the pain of her homeland, the Foxconn workers suffering under subhuman working conditions, but only through the oculus of her phone. It's just like this with Chau: I can see so much of him smiling, exercising, seeing the world, that I almost feel like I am there with him, and the virtual and physical worlds intertwine. I am brought back, once more, to Xie's work, specifically her line in "Visual Orders" which goes, "self consciousness anticipates an excess of seeing / it's incessancy"—the only reason why I kept digging into Chau's life, kept trying to see into Chau, is because of my own propensity to "figure out" Asian American men, like I am constantly trying to do with myself. Yet there is an imperceptible, impassable distance engendered by Instagram: everyone knows it is a fake veneer of our "best lives," but Chau went ahead and said it explicitly, that it had absolutely nothing to do with the mission he had set out to achieve.
Thailand was my first and last overseas mission trip, and unlike Chau, I didn't decide to head back and try my hand again. During the following summers I attended an SAT boot camp, attended a humanities program, went to Quizbowl competitions, and tutored numerous small Korean children. Meanwhile, I heard of my church friends exorcising demons and healing bone fractures, and saw my Instagram littered with photos of smiling Korean faces enveloped in a sea of jittery, excited brown and black children.

My mom doesn't understand why I travel by myself, why I continue to want to travel and teach abroad. "에들 영어 좀 가르치는 것 이 무슨 도움 이에요," she would always tell me when talking about my post-graduate plans. "정말 도와주고 싶으면 예수님에 대해 말 좀해." What help will teaching students some English provide? If you really want to make an impact, tell them about Jesus. I nod, as I usually do, and then remain quiet, effectively stymying any further conversation.

She does not understand that my desire to teach is not one of pure altruism, nor even a decision guided primarily by altruism. I do not tell her that I want to teach in places like Ukraine or Indonesia because I am selfish. I want to go to these foreign places because it was there where my thoughts towards my own identity felt alive, challenged, and coherently incoherent. Because I want to push up against the upper limits of my mobility, my psyche, to the point where I will trigger a free fall into a place I do not yet know. The teaching and the community engagement is also of course important, and I will undoubtedly work hard to contribute what I can locally, but frankly this is not my foremost priority.

As an Asian American Christian, and one who wants to leave this country and similarly live in foreignness, how could I help but respect the depth of Chau’s convictions, despite how
problematic they were? How could I help but project my own racial and religious insecurities onto Chau, and impose the fear of subpar assimilation, of not being “Christian” and “Asian” enough, as an impetus that drove his convictions even further? And how could I have any answers of what the “right” media coverage for Chau should be, other than simply saying that the way newspapers have covered him is grossly unjust?

This is why seeing John Chau's face all over newspaper headlines struck me so much. Less a sympathy towards his plight: I believe in heaven, and believe that Chau will go to heaven, and have more sympathy for the local Karen Christians who were arrested as collaborators. Nor even the attacks on naive Christian missionaries and the colonialist forces behind them, which I also agree with. It was the fact that Chau, a diminutive, young man who grew up as a minority in America, believed he could go absolutely anywhere, and acted upon this belief.
"닥터 다니엘입니다. 제가 하프 코리안이라 발임이 좀 찢쳐서 듣다 보면 웃기니까 웃기면 그냥 웃어도 됩니다."

Hi. I'm Dr. Daniel. Since I'm half-Korean, my pronunciation is a bit awkward, so as you hear it it might be a bit funny — it's okay to laugh.

Dr. Daniel Spencer, a minor character in the hit 2016 Korean drama *Descendents of the Sun*, speaks these lines with near impeccable pronunciation, introducing himself to the female lead of the drama, Kang Mo Yeon. The scene cuts to Daniel after showing a nearby turf war between Korean special forces and the local organized crime unit, all set within the fictional, ludicrously exoticized Middle Eastern country of Uruk.

However, Daniel, played by the Korean-Canadian repatriate Jasper Cho, enunciates the words "half Korean," which he says in English, with an American accent. As I watched this episode, I paused and rewatched this scene, making sure that I had heard correctly. It wasn't the fact that a Korean actor was using English words — much of contemporary Korean borrows directly from English. What I was fascinated by was his pronunciation: when English becomes phoneticized into Korean, Koreans most often contort the words to fit the Korean alphabet. For example, English "L" sounds transform into softer "R" sounds: the word "English," when spoken by Koreans, would be pronounced more like "In-gu-rish-u." But Daniel chooses to enunciate the words "half Korean" in impeccable American English.
Mo Yeon immediately replies to Daniel by saying "발음 좋으신데," your pronunciation is good though, but the conversation immediately switches subjects. What I saw in these few seconds was this: Daniel must introduce himself, must self-interpellate, through his linguistic deficiencies, even though his Korean is near perfect. He must also become half-Korean in the drama, even though the actor Jasper Cho is fully Korean and looks as such, with his bangs and pale skin. To be on screen, Jasper's linguistic deficiencies must match his phenotypical ones.

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John Yau, one of the great Asian American poets, along with people like Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee, has written for decades about the linguistic anxieties of being an Asian subject in America, specifically as one whose life is centered around English but is looked at as a babbling Chinese foreigner. He writes in his 2005 poem "Ing Grish," "I do not know Ing Grish, but I will study it down to its / black and broken bones." Like Yau, I have tried to study English deeply over the past four years, attempting to reach "down to its / black and broken bones." There have been two consequences to such an act: first, the fact that no matter how much I study and write in English, I will still, at times, be looked at as an Asian foreigner only able to speak "Ing Grish," and second, that I will simultaneously lose grasp of my mother tongue, and my old language will begin to lose shape. A double bind, of sorts.

Like Dr. Daniel, I introduce myself negatively, must introduce myself by what I cannot do (be Korean), what I cannot say (speak Korean) before any other Korean person. For example, I always announce straight away to relatives that my Korean is poor, has been poor, will remain
poor, simply to preempt comparisons of my fluency to that of a toddler. Or when I am at a cafe, I pronounce "Iced Coffee" with an American accent rather than a Korean one, and then re-pronounce in Korean, just to clear up any confusion and declare that I am not Korean-Korean. Small, seemingly inconsequential moments.

"Your Korean is shit," a friend told me, with no malicious intention. I brushed it off, saying "yeah, I know," but these four words have stayed with me. I only speak Korean to my family and my girlfriend, who I know will not judge me for my speaking skills. With my parents I am fully confident in my Konglish, my mongrelized breed of Korean mixed with English, as I know for them too, their understanding of English is much stronger than their speaking skills.

My own Korean is nowhere as good as that of Dr. Daniel - being born in Korea but raised in the States, I can speak and write proficiently, but can't do much else. Yet this was never that big of an issue, as I grew up in Southern California high schools and churches with numerous other Koreans just like me. But when I finally left America, to spend a year in England, my Koreanness, or lack thereof, became exposed to an extent that I had not felt outside of Seoul. In America, at least in Providence and in San Diego, I could hide behind my Korean Americanness, or Asian Americanness, and most would understand: *parents raised in Korea, kids raised in America*. Yet, when I left America to spend a year in Britain, there was no racial shield for me to hide behind: the fact that Asian Americanness could even *be* a shield was a moment of learning.
Cambridge, England

In early October, 2018, I entered the first mixer of the Cambridge Korean Society at St. Johns College, in a beautiful, mirrored reception room served by suited waiters and filled with Korean kids in hoodies. I knew I would feel awkward, stressed, anxious, but I was still slightly optimistic because I was utterly lonely. At Brown, and many US universities, there are separate clubs for international Koreans and Korean Americans, because of stark cultural differences despite a similar ethnicity. Thus, I knew what to expect: Koreans from a few select schools in Seoul, many from wealthy chaebol families, who had all previously partied and drank together in Korea.

James Baldwin also left the US in his early 20's, albeit as a black man in the mid 20th century, to escape racism and reconfigure himself. He writes in "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," about his own distance, as an African American, from Africans while living in Paris. Despite sharing a similar shade of skin, Baldwin is unable to fully insert himself into the particular blackness of the Africans from France’s former colonies, and undergoes an acute, cognitive dissonance. Here he talks about the African American coming into relation with the African migrant:

The ambivalence of his status is thrown into relief by his encounters with the Negro students from France’s colonies who live in Paris. The French African comes from a region and a way of life which—at least from the American point of view—is exceedingly primitive, and where exploitation takes more naked forms.

Baldwin, in Paris, faces all the racism directed at Africans, but gains the privileges of claiming Americanness as fundamental to his black identity, and can thus never escape a status as interloper. During the mixer, I began to think of myself as a “charred Korean,” as I was not only
much tanner than everyone else in the room, but also someone who has been westernized among a race so proud of its 단일민족, or ethnic purity. Most people who are 교포, or overseas Korean, feel a similar feeling: just as there is a common ethnic purity among Koreans, albeit one beginning to change with the influx of immigrants, there is a common ethnic impurity among overseas Koreans, especially once visiting Korea and becoming marked with irreconcilable difference.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the underpinnings of such an isolation is through Chang Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, his 1995 debut. The novel focuses on a straight, young, highly educated Korean American male, Henry Park, who is literally and symbolically invisible in the eyes of society: Park works as a spy in New York City, quietly assuming different guises around people he needed to extract information from. In *Native Speaker*, Henry is described by his wife Lelia like this: “Your face is part of the equation, but not in the way you’re thinking. You look like someone listening to himself. You pay attention to what you’re doing. If I had to guess, you’re not a native speaker. Say something.” Like Henry, I have grown up hyperconscious of how my speech is portrayed to others, partially due to growing up in a Korean culture obsessed with 눈치, or a hypersensitivity to social dynamics.

Maybe this is why after a few initial conversations at the mixer, introducing myself as a yearlong exchange student from Brown and trying to force small talk, I ended up leaving the event early, sensing an ingroup consolidating and being too prideful to try to push myself into it.

But I know that this experience is in no way limited to me, or to Asian Americans: half a century earlier, Baldwin acutely observed his own psychic immobility to assimilate, saying, “The African before him has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty; but the African has not yet
endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past.” Here, I find the words to finally elucidate my own sense of turmoil: *the utter alienation of myself from my people and my past.*

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Among Cambridge’s 31 colleges, scattered throughout the town center, Pembroke College sits near the center, a close walk from the bustling town center. Pembroke is a rather small college, consisting of a slightly angled, rectangular layout — you can walk from one corner to the other in less than two minutes. I lived in the Orchard building, a 20th century addition among several buildings from the 14th and 15th centuries, all aged with a stately, aristocratic dignity.

I was shocked to see a landscape so replete with a wide variety of flowers that are diligently manicured each and everyday, so much so that I would always wake up to the trimming of trees, the mowing of grass, and the sweeping of leaves. My two windows faced into the college, and were framed by a lavender wisteria tree. Everything from fuschias to laburnums to roses to palm trees dotted the small campus. College activities fit well into this landscape: I wore gowns and suits to multi-course dinners with three types of wine, attended choral services in a chapel designed by Sir Christopher Wren, and sat in seminars taught by the country’s most erudite scholars. I was not blind to the fact that Brown, too, was moneyed, and that Brown students had the highest median parent income in the Ivy League, but I found myself immersed in a different kind of wealth, an aristocratic stature I had thought was completely mythic.
I was also shocked to see that Pembroke's had a more diverse group of flowers than of students, which is mirrored in Cambridge as a whole: among domestic students, 2,014 white British students were accepted into the university in 2017. In comparison, 132 British Indians, 28 British Pakistanis, 24 British Bangledeshis, and 77 British Chinese were accepted. Among international students, 28 Korean students had been accepted. More strikingly, however, only 58 Black British students were accepted, prompting newspaper titles such as Metro News's headline "Cambridge Uni accepts more Eton grads than black men," Eton being a prestigious boarding school for boys. When these numbers are then divided up among the 31 constituent colleges in Cambridge, you can count the number of minority students on two hands.

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Living outside of the United States and Korea for the first time in my life, my own race immediately came into relief: just two days into the school year, I wrote,

*erasure of identity: kind of dramatic, but it's actually very disorienting to be in a place where "Asian American identity" simply does not exist. Where Asian exists, American exists (barely, in caricature), and British and European exist, but Asian American is nonexistent. Feels weird not having anybody of my particular culture here at college, which I realized I've never been lacking in the 20 years I've lived heretofore.*

*Erasure*, in retrospect, seemed fitting within the context of that year, where I had to erase the particularities of my Asian Americanness, my particular feeling of unbelonging, to become the American exchange student whom others could then understand.
Putting aside my early term melodrama, I realized very early on that something was off, all before I had the vocabulary around Cambridge’s overwhelming whiteness, the reticence of the British, and the country's backwards racial discourse. This would be, as Ben Lerner writes in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, a “year abroad, a year cast out of the line of years.” I felt a wave of isolation beginning to set in, perhaps exacerbated by the fact that I was no longer a freshman in college, and wearily knew how superficial student orientations could be. I would ask classmates to grab meals but they would be busy, and even if we did meet, the conversation would consistently taper off after a few minutes, and we would be left staring past each other, into the Baroque paintings lining the dining hall walls.

At Brown, I had felt lonely, of course, but never this sense that I had to discard a part of myself in my presentation. My three closest male friends were Asian American like me, and our race was naturally connective, as well as a topic to be continually parsed. All four of us were straight, studious males who had grown up in high achieving public school districts with a large percentage of Asian students. We were comfortable in this regard.

Speaking plainly, I was ignorant. Growing up, I had read classics of British literature, like *Middlemarch* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, but then I had fallen in love with Zadie Smith's novels and believed that her London, a city of black and brown immigrants, would fill the halls at Cambridge University. Instead, I met a college that was supposedly "color blind," and what I heard over and over from my peers took the form of something like this:

*It's the system that's fucked up. Our universities only care about grades and scores, which is perhaps the only objective criterion to examine academic merit. Universities shouldn't be responsible for fixing Britain's broken education system, should they?"*
This reasoning, I thought, seemed to mirror how Britain has dealt with its own legacy of colonizing half the world: it's not our problem anymore, we're no longer responsible. Enslavement is easier to hide, I guessed, when it happened in far away countries.

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On my second Sunday at Cambridge, I slipped quietly into a church service I intended to just as quietly slip out of. It was a towering, Anglican church in the center of town, holding centuries and centuries of history, yet one recently renovated to discard pews for chairs, hymns for Christian rock, and liturgies for personal testimonies. However, it was there in which I saw a face that looked like mine, that of an East Asian male. He said his name was Jonathan Chan, he was half-Malaysian, half-Korean, raised in America and Singapore. He studied English, and was heavily involved with Cambridge's decolonization campaign, which sought to radically reform Cambridge's Anglocentric modus operandi.

He invited me to the Cambridge Chinese Christian Fellowship, which was largely made up of Singaporean Chinese—in this sense, I enacted my own jump into the global Chinese diaspora. During our first small group gathering, around 15 people huddled into a dorm room eating take out Chinese food. I was shocked, not knowing that many Singaporeans, Malaysians, Indonesians, etc, were ethnic Chinese immigrants, believing that "Cambridge Chinese Christian Fellowship" meant mainland Chinese students. I was also acutely nervous, like I had been at the Korean Society mixer, but optimistic, because I was still utterly lonely. If I can't connect with these people, I thought, I'm not sure who I could connect to.
We shared food, introductions, songs, prayers, and kind words, and I immediately felt welcomed in a way I had not in the past few weeks. When we broke out into groups of three, I began to tell my group about the isolation I had been feeling, and they nodded in empathy. "That's why we have this fellowship," I remember someone saying, "Even for people who share a common religion, the cultural differences are too stark."

That year I became just Singaporean enough to enjoy a sense of kinship, but just Asian American enough to mark my difference. I learned that the fellowship had become yoked together through religion and race, but most importantly, a sense of difference. We were not among the 87% of Britain that is white, neither were we among the 90% of British Asians who are South Asians, whose families largely came post-WWII to fulfill labor shortages throughout the country. We were born into relative privilege, with professional, highly educated parents that pushed us through good public schools (me) and the country's three top public magnet schools (virtually every Singaporean student at Cambridge).

Yet Singapore had nevertheless been a British colony, subject to erasure and ideological violence. It was institutions like Cambridge that performed much of this ideological damage, this reductive Orientalizing done in the name of westernization and development. Theirs was a history of colonization, and mine was one of migrant labor, but outside of the systemic movements of bodies, I saw more similarities than differences. Perhaps responses of deference and excellence were something Asian Americans and Asians in Britain shared, at least in this elite bubble of institutional prestige.

However, this decision to become part of the Singaporean community was twinned with a similar racial interpellation outside of my own control, albeit one the Singaporeans had been
likewise shocked by. Agneiszka Sobocinska notes, "As the twentieth century ended, however, the locus of tourist power moved steadily east [...] by 2012, the Chinese had become the world's top tourism spenders, with 100 million traveling overseas." I became intimately comfortable as "Chinese tourist" during my year in England, as my daily walk to class crossed through the town's central tourist spot.

Every day, young British men spinning advertisement boards would hail me, alternating between *ni hao* and *hullo*, asking if I wanted to "punt" on their river boats. And with my backpack and steely, unwavering complexion, I chose not to acknowledge their call. Inside my own Pembroke College, I would be stopped by the porters, who informed me that only students could be on college grounds. I thought of Tash Aw's quote, “We want the stranger to be one of our own, someone we can understand.” To these British workers, I could only be comprehensible as someone from the Mainland.

I had come to Cambridge to study "English," but what I began to learn was the "Singlish" of my Singaporean friends, which I had previously assumed was simply broken English. Singlish, I learned, was a dialect of English sprinkled in with Hokkien, Mandarin, and Malay loanwords. I discovered not only that they learned English as their first language, but that their parents had as well, a stark contrast from many Asian Americans, of whom 65% are still foreign born: people my age often spoke English at school and with friends, and their mother tongues at home. Singlish, when taken out of Singapore and into Britain, became their "Ing Grish," an English that has faced so much internalized racism that Singaporean government launched an annual "Speak Good English Movement" to promote "Standard English." I saw their code
switching in real time: "cheers" with the British, "okay, lah" with fellow Singaporeans, and somewhere in between with me.

It was only after I left Cambridge that I realized I was more comfortable talking to white people in an academic setting than in a religious setting: I had been a minority in education ever since I was in preschool, but I had always gone to an ethnically homogenous church growing up, and then a largely Asian American Christian fellowship at Brown. The dynamics did not change at Cambridge: school friends, diverse, Christian friends, same same.

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A few weeks later, when I told a Black British student named Perfect at church that I was Korean, he asked in response, "so are you from North or South Korea?" I laughed off the microaggression, one I had not heard since middle school, saying I was from the South. I thought of the Asian American studies seminars I had taken at Brown, where I was encouraged to say "neither," that I was from San Diego. But in reality I always introduce myself as "being born in Korea, raised in California." Even saying I was Asian American was tricky, because Asian American and Asian British are not similar whatsoever: Asian British means South Asian, Muslim, and largely working class. BBC, or British Born Chinese, many of whose parents were professionals from Hong Kong, better fits my own immigration story. Plus, here were two of maybe five minority students at Holy Trinity Church, and so how could I be offended by his intentions to get to know me better?
Yet, that night, I thought of the implications of that choice, saying I was from South Korea instead of North Korea: how could I claim either one, when my grandparents were from both, and I wasn't raised in either? I was never taught Korean history growing up, was never told stories about Korean folk tales. Moreover, why was I so furious that he thought that I could be from North Korea? When my grandparents were young there was no North Korea, which only came into existence because the US and the USSR needed to fight out their differences on a disposable parcel of land. Although by then I was indubitably tired of constantly thinking of and talking about racial identity, I kept pondering Perfect's question and my response, but continued to make vapid small talk with him whenever I saw him at church.

In his essay "Stranger in the Village," James Baldwin recounted his experiences living in Leukerbad, a rural village Switzerland, in which "It did not occur to me—possibly because I am an American—that there could be people anywhere who had never seen a Negro." Like Baldwin, growing up in a country that presupposes itself as the center and arbiter of the world, the quite rational possibility that some British people had simply never interacted with Asians, much less Asian Americans, had never crossed my mind—I deeply underestimated the stratification and homogeneity of upper class Britain. Unlike Baldwin, however, I had never once said, "I am an American," or thought of myself that way, even though I had said the Pledge of Allegiance every school day for twelve years. Maybe this is American privilege, the fact that because of our "exceptionalism" and central position in the world, we never think of other countries until the news is packaged as apocalyptic. Or maybe this is because for most of my life, non-Americanness was legal truth, as I only became an American citizen at the age of 18.
In Leukerbad, Baldwin becomes spectacle, a subject of "astonishment, curiosity, amusement and outrage," and uses these reactions to think deeply about his "motive for living under American culture." I too sought to really know what it meant to be Asian American, but unlike Baldwin, I am not a black male, not a body racialized to provoke "astonishment" or "outrage," but rather, its opposite: docility, sexlessness, efficiency, alienness. For the most part that term, I slipped through Cambridge quietly and on the fringes, generally left alone.

To be a minoritarian American abroad is not a singular experience. I was stared at by locals, yes, but much less so than when I was in a pizza restaurant with my dad in Phoenix, where white, tanned dads in ill fitting Hawaiian shirts stared us down, or when I was in New Orleans, in which a Walmart full of black families looked at mine with surprise and curiosity. Teju Cole, in his "Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin's 'Stranger in the Village,'" which opens his wide spanning essay collection *Known and Strange Things*, declares himself to be a "custodian of a black body" when traveling abroad, and ideally, I would envision myself similarly, a custodian for Asian immigrant bodies and third culture kids across the world. But I couldn't.

Baldwin, in his "Autobiographical Notes," writes, "I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." I, on the other hand, am still looking for a reason to devote myself to America other than the sheer reason that I spent most of my life there. Perhaps this is where the crucial difference between Baldwin and I lies. And so my first term in Cambridge, then, became a rich testing ground to gauge just how deep my allegiance to America went.
Lisbon, Portugal

Amidst a scrambling flurry of essays, my first term at Cambridge ended in the beginning of December, and I decided to spend a week in Lisbon: tickets were cheap, the cost of living was cheap, and the weather was sunny. Moreover, I had an irrepressible urge to finally see some of the European continent, places that, unlike Britain, were not blanketed in a damp, grey fog. I had also heard that countries in Southern Europe moved much slower than Britain, which brought me back to a major reason I left the United States in the first place: to escape late capitalist conceptions of endless productivity, to find places where the thoughts in my head could swirl quietly and slowly. *I just need some space*, I thought, exhausted from adjusting to Cambridge's social life.

I didn't think I would talk much at all during this trip, but the person sitting next to me on my flight to Lisbon complimented my jacket, on which I had ironed on a magazine cover of Frank Ocean. I subsequently fell into conversation with her, an art student from Lisbon whose family had originally come from Cape Verde, and we conversed lightly about our music and studies. However, my first inroad to the Portugese, which I took as normative, was actually an anomaly: Lisbon, I discovered, is more than 90% white.

That night, I found my way to a tiny bedroom located in the Alfama district, the oldest neighborhood in Lisbon, one filled with bars, restaurants, and historical sites. My first impression of Lisbon was one of comparison, seeing San Francisco if San Francisco was devoid of technology companies. One is the West Coast of California, and the other is the West Coast of Europe. Both are cities on hills, situated by rivers crossed by magnificent bridges. Labyrinth of alleys climb up and down each cities, pastel houses cling onto hills, trams ease the burden of
uphill walking. There is more sun, however, in Portugal than in San Francisco, and the Mediterranean climate reminded me more of Southern California than the often foggy San Francisco.

Early the next morning, I took a walk around the neighborhood, found a suitable coffee shop, and journaled, which was a ritual that had always grounded me while traveling:

*What do people think of me: Mainlander tourist? Random Asian dude wandering around? Hopefully the world has gotten cosmopolitan enough to not consider me a specimen. But what is better in this case: gaudy, rich Chinese tourist or unknown foreigner? To be labeled incorrectly or rendered invisible?*

It had been a while since I have gotten stares from strangers, but perhaps I overdramatized the curiosity of locals as something deeply malicious. Maybe it was because I had too much room to think, and no one to actually talk to. Nevertheless, as I waded through the city, soaking in the sun and wandering around historic sites, I could not disentangle the glance of the stranger from an Althusserian, racial interpellation.

The vacation itself was restful: I sat outside and read while simultaneously drinking espresso and wine—most of my subsequent conversations in Lisbon would be with novels, rather than people. I walked around historic neighborhoods, reassured of the universality of grandmothers line drying clothes, of dark skinned immigrants making doner kebabs, of teens sneaking around back alleys.

On the morning of my third day, I decided to take the train and go to the Oceanario de Lisboa, the largest indoor aquarium in Europe. I then lost track of time, spending an entire hour just sitting and looking at the penguins glide through the water, circling around and around and around the small enclosure. And then onto the otters, skimming through their mini river,
scratching their stomachs and bobbing lazily. And finally to the immense, underwater tropical forest designed by aquarist Takashi Amano, holding 160,000 liters of water, 46 aquatic plant species, and 10,000 fish. I felt calmer inside the aquarium—surrounded by marine life and screaming children, punctuated by slices of momentary clarity—than I had been for the last three days.

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On the fourth morning, while at my coffee shop, I read an interview with author Kazuo Ishiguro. Long before I had read any of his works, I was fascinated with Ishiguro, largely because his name was often the only Asian one I had seen growing up in my school and classroom libraries. Much later, I found that he had written a book called *The Remains of the Day*, a novel about a mid 20th century English butler facing the decline of the aristocratic class and a missed chance at love. Ishiguro, to me, seemed to defy every characterization of the "ethnic" writer, and I admired the diligence he put into his craft. I jotted down this quote from one of Ishiguro's interviews:

> People are not two-thirds one thing and the remainder something else. Temperament, personality, or outlook don't divide quite like that. The bits don't separate clearly. You end up a funny homogeneous mixture. This is something that will become more common in the latter part of the century—people with mixed cultural backgrounds, and mixed racial backgrounds. That's the way the world is going.

I downloaded *The Remains of the Day* onto my Kindle, and read this indiscernible racial mixing, this messiness of identity, into the novel, perhaps unwisely: from browsing review after review, there was no mention of "race" in *The Remains of the Day*, which made sense, as the protagonist
is a white male in a setting that conjured up pictures of Cambridge. Yet, like I had seen with John Chau, who had died a few weeks prior, how could I not read race into Ishiguro's fictions, when I had been simultaneously taught that every ethnic writer was ethnic informant, providing readers a glimpse into their sociological and interior worlds? How could I not read Mr. Stevens' life as a butler, his loyalty and subservience to Lord Darlington, as separate from the racial consciousness of Ishiguro? Here is the way Stevens illustrates his life:

And let me now posit this: "dignity" has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits [...] The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost [...] They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit [...] he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. (42-3)

Follow this passage with this one from Native Speaker, in which Henry Park describes his own job as a spy:

I will duly retreat to the position of the good volunteer, the invisible underling. I have always known that moment of disappearance, and the even uglier truth is that I have long treasured it. That always honorable-seeming absence. It appears I can go anywhere I wish. Is this my assimilation, so many years in the making? Is this the long-sought sweetness? (290)

In my reading, Henry Park became a sardonic, unhinged Stevens, and I saw similarities in their obsessive presentations of self in regards to language, their acute sense of alienation from society, their perceived sense of invisibility. I sank into these thoughts as I wandered throughout Lisbon during the day, speaking no more than "yes" and "thank you" and "excuse me." Often, throughout the days, I wondered why I had come to this place specifically, when all I did was
read books. Elizabeth Bishop, the 20th century poet, responds in her poem "Questions of Travel" (1956), to these questions of why travel? and why should I have the right to travel? She writes,

Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have not been entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?

About a year after my time in Portugal, Jenny Xie told me that during the three years that she spent in Southeast Asia, the only thing that remained constant in her life was the practice of reading. She let me in on the fact that most of her writing happened while she was a graduate student in New York. Her poem, "Ongoing," seems to exude this sense, making me believe that although everything in life could be in flux, reading would never leave me. "Books that prowled her," the poem says. "Until the hard daybreak, and for months after."

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On my last night in Portugal, I took a long bus ride to Cabo de Roca, a precipitous cliff and sublime promontory jutting into the Pacific Ocean (Tripadvisor had good things to say). The bus wound through fields now browned and yellowed, the last leaves drooping off tree branches, and glided through hamlets that looked borrowed from Cezanne paintings. On the bus with me was a young Korean woman also traveling alone, who I saw using her phone to film the bus's surroundings throughout the entire trip. Perhaps she is streaming for her friends, I thought. I sat five feet away from her, two tourists surrounded by rowdy children coming home from the city and their grandmothers carrying full grocery bags.
When I got to Cabo de Roca, right before sunset, I looked down from a sharp cliff, hundreds of feet from the ocean shore, far enough from the waves to hear only the soft baritone hum of each crash. The weather conditions were near impeccable, and I sat down to just watch the clouds, which took the shape of a flock of geese, transforming through multiple shades of pink. While I sat, I saw more Korean people: middle aged folks tumbling out of a tour bus, polyester vests and visor hats in tow, reminding me of my mom and many aunts who were thousands of miles to the east and to the west. I was basking in my senses, but also cognizant of the reality that I was the only solo traveler at the cliffs.

I thought of approaching the Korean tour group, and saying, *사진을 찍어 줄 가요,* *would you like me to take your photo?* But this would mean that they would grasp my foreignness, and then I would have to quickly intercede and say, 'I was raised in the states, so my Korean isn't very good.' And so, unsurprisingly, I remained mute. Perhaps I was just scared of speaking in a language I hadn't fully spoken in months. Perhaps it was just pride in not wanting to appear lesser than.

And why was it that as I accumulated more and more of these moments of seeing Koreanness without having it reflected back, that I became increasingly paralyzed? While sitting on the cliffs, accompanied by the rumble of the waves, I wondered if I should give it all up, to save myself from more mental headache. *American, American, American,* I wrote down in my notebook. *Charred Korean, Charred Korean, Charred Korean.*

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Lisbon  

Today: about twenty words total:
'yes' a few times, 'no' probably once
'one two three' while snapping a bronze couple
'thank you' at meals (I know, 'Obrigado,' but I am language shy)
one faint 'hello' to grandmother
glaring at me while hanging laundry
out the window.
the rest are 'what the fuck's!' after witnessing
garden eels poke their heads out of the aquarium sand and
shrimpfish float upside down and
does reading poetry out loud to yourself count?

If the average male speaks 7,000 words a day
how many words can he think?
does he think 'you hard fought reward'
into and through every clear sky,
every dapple-dawn-drawn sun?
does he nod, then ponder, 'Julia Roberts,'
eat pray love is perfect, and the personal is the political,
What words? when he smiles at the 'ni hao's',
smiles at the indian brothers who smile at the
drunk men ridiculing them
even though their doner wrap, at four euros,
is impeccable

And averagely,
I'm the only diner commiserating with dead words
Milan, Italy

By March, 2019, another whole, entire term had come and gone. By now I had gotten familiar with the particularities of the British, but the brutal, unrelenting British winter had only exacerbated my depression. Like choosing to go to Portugal, I decided to go to Milan after staring at the Google Flights map for around ten minutes: a round trip flight from London was 25 dollars, it was 60 to 70 degrees, and my friends from Brown would arrive in Florence a week after. Cambridge term breaks were six weeks long — what else was I supposed to do?

The actual reason why the breaks were so long is that Cambridge students are expected to finish their dissertations and start studying for the final exams. I had decided to write my dissertation on Teju Cole and his *Open City*, Tao Lin's *Taipei*, and Frank O'Hara's poetry, specifically about how each narrator fought against physical and ideological erasure while aimlessly wandering around New York City. Central to my argument was the dichotomy between the Baudelarian *flaneur*, the "passionate spectator" who takes in the universe while strolling, and the lesser known *fugueur*, mad travelers who wandered away from their lives, and when found, could not remember why they had embarked on travel.

Thus, as I constantly left Britain to drop myself into places like Amsterdam and Dublin and Lisbon, I began to see myself enacting a likeness to the literary protagonists I was spending countless hours writing about, sometimes as *flaneur*, sometimes as *fugueur*. But ultimately, even in retrospect, there remained an impenetrable blockage as to why I went to these places, why I found myself spending hours looking at otters and roving around neighborhoods.

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I arrived in Milan via flying over the powdery Alps, which made sitting in an unforgiving, cramped middle seat a little bit more bearable. My first impression of Milan was that it was beautiful, but odd: glass skyscrapers jutted into Renaissance cathedrals which were surrounded by faux neoclassical residential streets which seem to have been built in the mid 1900's, rather than in the 1750's. Furthermore, the women wore beautiful, long wool coats in 70 degree weather and walked incredibly quickly. Milan is the business hub of Italy, but the businesses themselves run off the prestige of Italian art and design, which thus made it unclear as to whether the city was attempting to be capitalist haven, contemporary metropolis, or center of Italian heritage, at any given time.

And for my first meal, I headed straight to eat Korean food, which I had craved while in Cambridge. But in retrospect, maybe I also craved social interactions with Korean people, that what I wanted just as much as the taste of food was the environment that it engendered, the closest microcosm I could find to my home back in San Diego. Maybe I had resigned myself to never being able to confront a Korean person, but knew that waiters were obligated to speak to me.

When I walked over to a nearby Korean restaurant, a place called 진미, or Jinmi, I was addressed in Korean, treated as a Korean. 어서 오세요. Please come in. 여기에 앉지세요. Please sit down here. I felt warmth in hearing Korean spoken once again, and scoured the menu, in which dishes like Japchae (glass noodles) and Ddukbokki (spicy rice cake) were filed under the category of Pastas. The next day, I went to a different Korean restaurant on that same street. I walked in, signalled that I was a party of one, and was wordlessly accompanied to a seat, and
treated coldly until I asked, in Korean, for water. I tried to figure out why I was interpellated differently: the only difference, perhaps, was that on the first day, I came in with bangs, the characteristic Korean male haircut, but on the second day, I came with my hair parted.

I fell into a similar rhythm as I did in Portugal: eating, drinking, wandering around museums, visiting picturesque neighborhoods, talking to almost no one, soaking in the exterior foreignness and letting my accumulated inner turmoil sink to the bottom. Like in Lisbon, I visited a coffeeshop to read and sit every morning, beginning my days with a sense of regularity. This time, however, there was no extended meditation on my racial identity, just a distinct feeling of my mind being emptied out and a sense of soft nothingness taking its place.

I began to understand that my own process of writing began in an image or place, in an attempt to process the onslaught of stimuli I encountered, and I felt myself treading the footsteps of Jenny Xie and Celina Su, as well as Wong May, an older, Chinese-Singaporean-American poet living in Ireland. In an interview found in her anthology *Picasso's Tears*, May responds to the question on challenges of constant geographic flux by saying, "the 'here' and 'now' does matter. I moved about a lot, changing continents and suitcases, But poetry— or rather writing— puts me 'on the spot.'"
Foreign Winds

Sometimes hoping that foreign winds
will keep knocking away everything inside
and that hefty greens and the heftier sun
can finish their job of melting

and the molting worked, slowly
airplane mode an oven knob up wounded,
twisted by Jesus (gold), Mary (mosaic), the Saints (bloodied)
who met me at eye level and exhaled, ad infinitum

I touched down on Gatwick's runway,
the suction flooded in, and
I couldn't scream *Fuck* but I lusted for its energy,
its consequence

so then I lived on trains, moved on literature,
thinking after nature and asking God if my life pleased him,
as it certainly displeased me
or what, am I just fleeing?
On my last day in Milan, I was craving Asian food—typical—and scrolled through Maps to find a Chinatown nearby, learning on Wikipedia that Milan contains the most Chinese residents in all of Italy, at over 20,000. Milan's Chinatown had been established in the 1920's by immigrants from Zhejiang province, who came to work in the city's textile and leather workshops. Today, the neighborhood orbits around a cobblestone road in the northwest of the city, and I passed through hairdressing salons, leather stores, medicine centers, and cheap imported goods stores that gave me a sense of grounding, albeit a nervous one: wherever I was in the world, I would never be far from China. I sipped bubble tea and ate what the Italians call "Chinese Ravioli," and what the rest of the world calls dumplings.

"Here, there's no logic to melons and spring onions exchanging hands. No rhythm to men's briefs clothes-pinned to the fire escape," Jenny Xie writes in "Chinatown Diptych," observing Manhattan's Chinatown, which could just have easily been what I saw here in Milan. Yet, within these bustling streets, what immediately struck me was the stark division in class within Chinatown. The Chinese working class was hastily wrapping dumplings, squatting at storefronts, and delivering packages of food, and then the Chinese tourists and students, draped in Italian-made garments, perused the streets. And then there was me, in my black hoodie, black backpack, black jeans, and running sneakers.

While people watching on a bench, I reread D.T. Max's 2018 *New Yorker* article, entitled, "The Chinese Workers who Assemble Designer Bags in Tuscany," which I had read a few months prior. Max details the wave of Chinese immigration from Wenzhou, a port city south of Shanghai, to Prato, a city fifteen miles northwest of Florence, in the 1990's. Max writes that an estimated 100 Chinese-owned workshops in Tuscany were assembling bags for heritage brands
like Chanel and Saint Laurent. Many overstayed tourist visas, and others paid smugglers huge fees, which they had to work off like indentured servants. Today, Chinese immigrants make up 10% of the Prato's 200,000 residents, and have become the scapegoat for the city's growing anti-immigrant sentiments.

The Chinese diaspora, which, to the average European, I was a part of, is both the inheritor and the dispossessed of capitalist globalism. There is certainly a spectrum of privilege imbued in such a vast category: myself, and poets like Xie and Su, are what Ien Eng calls the "migrant intellectual" class, one whose mobility is afforded by prestigious educational degrees. We have passport privilege, are not racialized as threats, and have the means to move globally. "Always-already travellers in the same postmodern universe," as Eng would say.

And then there are those like my father, not quite "model minority" but solidly middle class, working their way through a new country to provide their children upward mobility, or perhaps just to let them avoid the brutal college entrance exam. And then there is the global migrant underclass, the "subaltern," who do service work in Chinatowns and Koreatowns across the entire world, including here in Milan, and build themselves and their families up without Western professional accreditations. And these are the people most keenly observed by Su, Xie, and myself, intrinsically creating a class dynamic confused by a racial, diasporic similarity. Class thus becomes a critical fixture that lies intertwined with racialization, and notions of "privilege" become messily complicated.

Milan and Prato's Chinatowns may be unique in the fact that it is Chinese people who are both making and buying luxurious Italian goods, but, having visited San Francisco and Manhattan's Chinatowns, it appears that intra-race inequality is intrinsic to such contemporary
ethnic enclaves. Francesco Xia, a Prato real-estate agent interviewed by Max, said, "The Chinese feel like the Jews of the thirties. Prato is a city that had a big economic crisis, and now there’s a nouveau-riche class of Chinese driving fancy cars, spending money in restaurants, and dressing in the latest fashions. It’s a very dangerous situation." According to Max, Chinese factory owners in Prato have even started hiring workers from countries like Syria, Pakistan, and Senegal. It was an all too familiar sight.

While growing up, family friends from Korea would immigrate to San Diego, open up small liquor stores or restaurants, work backbreaking hours, and grow their business. The Koreans took orders up front, and the Mexicans prepared the food out back, out of sight. My local Korean grocery store, which had begun as a corner store and eventually moved into a former Sears building, was the target of an ICE raid on February 23rd, 2019. 26 Mexican employees were detained. After asking friends about the details of the event, I heard that the undocumented Korean employees were told that the raid was coming, and stayed home that day.

*Was race all that important,* I thought, horrified by what I heard, *when the logic of capitalism subsumes skin color?* How important, really, was marking "Asian Americanness" as distinct from every other racial group, when it was clear to me that our propensity towards exploitation ran just as deep? During this time, I was 5,000 miles away—who could answer these questions for me?
Milan
Dorchester, England

After that week in Milan, I spent a surreal week with friends in Florence and Rome, and then returned to Britain. At the recommendation of a friend, and the shrinking timeline of break, I then immediately took a train out to Hilfield Friary, a small, monastic community of Franciscan Brothers in the very south of England. Today, the rustic assortment of gray brick buildings, built right after World War I, houses around ten brothers and a small community of lay people who help with keeping themselves as self sustainable as possible. The brothers not only vow chastity and poverty and live lives steeped in prayer, but work with the surrounding Hilfield lay community in farming, husbandry, and hospitality for outside guests, like myself.

After traversing halfway across England and getting off at Sherborne Station, I was met with an overwhelming green—when I am asked to illustrate Britain, I frequently use the word "leafy," because so much of it is grassy, rolling hills are filled with cows and sheep. And then I use the word "gray" to describe the perpetual cloudiness. And then I use the word "pale white" to describe the people. Nevertheless—There were no people at the station, and I sat on a bench until a lanky, bearded man named Brother Hugh came by and picked me up.

On our ride, after telling him that I was born in Korea, he brought up the fact that there was another Korean at the friary named Hee, a young woman who was volunteering for a year, and spoke little English. I immediately felt stressed at the possibility of talking to a Korean person, as I had come to Hilfield to enjoy a few more days of isolation in nature, to work on my poetry, as well as to recommit to a disciplined spiritual practice. The last thing I wanted was more cognitive dissonance.
After reaching the Friary, I laid down my bags and ventured off into the woods, picking up pheasant feathers and listening to the shrill cries of birds at dusk, basking in the utter absence of white noise. I came back for group dinner, which consisted of bitter, aromatic greens and vegetable chilli, and was introduced to Kyung Hee by Brother Hugh.

안녕하세요, she said. 이름은 뭐에요? Hello, she said. What is your name? I greeted her, told her my name, and then launched into my spiel, born in Korea raised in US, etc etc, and then returned to my seat to finish my meal. I did not see her when I got up to leave. I presumed that as a volunteer, she had to clean up after the meal.

The next day, at lunch, Kyung Hee asked me if we could have a conversation afterwards. We walked out into the beautiful fauna and flora tended by the Brothers and volunteers, and she began asking me several questions, questions that I stumbled over with my lackluster vocabulary: "what are your dreams?" "what is your idea of the world?" "how do you want to spend the rest of your life?" I then asked her about herself, learning that she had worked as a social worker in Seoul after growing up in the province my mom had, 전라도, Jeolla-doh. I learned that she was not religious, but had come on the recommendation of a Franciscan brother she had worked with in Seoul, wanting to get out of the stifling, conformist, and workaholic culture of Seoul. She encouraged me to see the night sky, to see the flowers, to quiet my life, and to enjoy the time I had at Hilfield. She also mentioned just how difficult it was to communicate with the British people: not only did she not speak English, but she was surprised by just how reticent the British people were. I learned that I was the first live person she had been able to formulate complete sentences with in months.
After a few hours, we circled back around to the friary—Kyung Hee had to return to work, and I retreated into the library to read, but we would continue to talk intermittently over the next few days. My conversation with Kyung Hee was the longest sustained conversation in Korean that I had ever had in my life. It felt awkward the entire time talking to someone around a decade older than me, but as a peer, especially as I had grown up only speaking in the honorific tense to my elders. Yet, I nevertheless stumbled into a multi-hour Korean conversation in rural Britain with a Korean person a decade senior, and had come out feeling calm, restored, and deeply encouraged. Barring the specificities of the interaction itself, I realized that I had psyched up my "charred Koreanness" and my lack of language fluency to the point of paralysis, and had forgotten that race and language were not the sole focal points by which people came into relation with others.

A few days later, as I was getting into Brother Hugh's car to be dropped off at Sherborne station, due to return to Cambridge, Kyung Hee ran up to me and handed me an envelope.

기온, 받으세요, she began in her letter, 이곳 힐필드에서 한국어로 소통 가능한 일을 만나 대화를 나누니 어찌나 행복하던지요. She affirmed my desires for my future, further encouraged me in my studies, and even wrote out a poetic prayer for me, which finishes with these lines: 자기를 버리고 죽음으로써 / 여생을 얻기 때문입니다. At its end, the letter was dated 2019년 4월 4일, 홍경희 드림. April 4th: It was my birthday.

Seven months later, I sat down and began writing, finally returning her letter on two ripped sheets of notebook paper. I expressed my appreciation, letting her know that she had helped ease a distance I had felt with Korean people. I talked to her about how my dreams and aspirations had changed since our last meeting, and inquired as to whether or not her dreams had
changed as well. I asked how she was finding Britain, if she was sick of British people, if she had
gotten more used to speaking English. And then I signed off.

My Letter

Along with my letter, I sent a copy of a poem, entitled "Goodbye Fluency," to Kyung Hee, even though her English fluency was quite limited—after all, she too had written me a poem, in Korean, nestled within her original letter.
"Goodbye Fluency"

1. Dusk
the British life expectancy is 81 years
but I weaved through their 18 softly,
proximate

summarily, dense recaps turned trifle:
who/what/when/where/why
good year / New York / great Friends / I don't know / I can't know

glancing constantly towards the sky
hoping for red streaks, cure by bloodletting
but only white clouds, then grey clouds, dismissed

summarily, ten hugs
two flies in my IPA saying
goodbyes

2. Night
Goodbye fluency means:
I unlocked the gate but she was already inside

we sat on recaps until they turned inert, and
she played me the short movie she starred in:
   Who was I looking at? Who was she looking at?

there was no longer conversation; it was late
and things were only 'good' or 'bad'
   the year: 'good'
   England: 'bad'
unmitigated feeling:
Al Green's crooning, *take me with you*

the room grew dim as we hushed
(I turned off the lights),
trying to burn her charred outline into my brain
worked - I had seen her, really seen her
outside now,
two shadows rolling big trunks
into and out of drunks
tentative grasping of the hand,
limp

+++ Teju Cole, in his "Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin's 'Stranger in the Village,'" writes,

If Leukerbad was his mountain pulpit, the United States was his audience. The remote village gave him a sharper view of what things looked like back home. He was a stranger in Leukerbad, Baldwin wrote, but there was no possibility for blacks to be strangers in the United States, nor for whites to achieve the fantasy of an all-white America purged of blacks.

It would be easy to say that England had been my pulpit, and that I was shining back onto the United States a clearer beam of light onto an "Americanness" that was neither black nor white. Yes, it was true that I began the process of unlearning a US-centric epistemology through my time in Europe, and simultaneously became aware of just how closely the world followed and was aware of American influence. But unlike Baldwin, and more like Cole, who was raised in Nigeria, I knew that I was just as much a stranger in Britain as I was in America, and didn't feel that different day to day, cloistered in my trans-Atlantic ivory towers.

Unlike Baldwin, what had come into "sharper view" for me was the split, the hyphen between my Korean-Americanness and my Asian-Americanness. I realized that the hyphen could not hold outside of America, and so I found myself teetering between two unreachable poles. I learned that hybridity is non-transferable, and when forced into a new place, loses its
distinctiveness in an effort to be understood. At least back at home, I could survive in the hyphen with others like me, rather than alone in the cold, grey British Isles.

"Why not wait until I've waited why out?" Jenny Xie asks in "Phnom Penh Diptych: Wet Season." I wished I had months, years to wait and figure out how to live outside the hyphen. I wished that my one off conversation with Kyung Hee could magically recur everywhere else. I wished I could become more comfortable in my own skin, or become more comfortable with discomfort. I know I grew, but maybe just not in the way that I had wanted.
Home/Home

The best time to begin is at the beginning of winter break, any winter break. The best place to begin is at the airport, blurry eyed. Not the airports that I come from, or layover at, because they are all mixed up in my mind, but my home base, San Diego International Airport (SAN), the third busiest, single runway airport in the world.

In Celina Su's poem "JFK Airport," included in Landia, she recalls her own yearning "to remember the physical sensation called homecoming / called homesickness." Su, in the poem, seems to want to entangle homecoming with homesickness, but cannot envision the emotional intensity of flying to JFK as one that reassures a homesickness, perhaps because she is struggling to even call the United States "home." At the end of the poem, she writes, "Just now, I almost write 'return home' instead of 're-enter the US,' but a slight ache below my diaphragm stops me." However, for me, still a college student, still looked after by parents, homecoming heals homesickness. And San Diego is the closest thing I'll know to home.

Over my four years in college so far, I've flown dozens of times into SAN: my shortest flight home took less than an hour, from San Francisco, and my longest, from Seoul by way of Shanghai, took over a day. By now, I have become much more acclimated to the state of "situated-in-displacement," as Bruce Robbins theorizes in "Comparative Cosmopolitanism," a state in which privileged cosmopolitans can continue to live in different places abroad because "they know that they can go home when it suits them." All of my travels, all of the thinking done in such travels, could not have been possible without the anchor that is my physical home.

For eighteen years, I stood in the "foreign national" line at San Diego International, and for the past three years, in the "US Citizen" line. The contours of the airport are imprinted in my
mind: I exit customs, turn right towards the path to baggage claim, and walk straight. When I come to the middle of the airport, which is really just one long walkway, I turn to the right and go down an escalator that officially takes me out of a secured zone. I wait for my suitcase in the baggage carousel. By this time, I feel my brain crashing, my innards sinking—all I want to do is sleep.

Olga Tocarzuk's collection *Flights*, which catapulted her into eventual Nobel Prize stardom, captures better than I can the impossibility of processing of my thoughts as I wait for my baggage, indexing everything I have just experienced from, and observing the ways in which I have grown as a person. In *Flights*, she writes,

> Lost in thought, he gazed out the window at the landscape that seemed to hurry off somewhere. Didn’t he ever think: what does ‘we were there’ really even mean? Where did those two weeks in France go? Those weeks that today can squeeze into just a couple of memories – the sudden onset of hunger by the city’s medieval walls and the twinkling of evening at a café where the roof was covered in grapevines. (40)

Sometimes it's a color that I remember from a trip, other times a tile pattern, sometimes the outline of a stranger's coat, other times a book I had read, and most often a disjointed assemblage of all, united in a sense of sparseness and vacancy. Standing by the baggage carousel, all of these elements are blanketed in an overwhelming sense of tiredness, the adrenaline of my trip having worn off hours prior.

I then text my dad what loading station I am at, and sooner or later, he shows up. Then, I go home and eat 육개장, 청국장, 된장찌개, all the fermented, funky stews found in Korean cuisine, prepared in advance by my mom. I visit my youngest sister in her room and witness how much she has grown in the past few months—most of the time, she is asleep, but once, she had waited outside for me at midnight. "She's uglier now, and meaner too," I jokingly tell my friends,
as she is hitting her pre-teen years, no longer interested in Pokemon and stuffed animals, and
definitely not interested in answering any of my questions. I fall asleep on the floor next to her,
because my bedroom has been rented out to various people ever since I left for college.

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Elizabeth Bishop, continuing on in her "Questions of Travel," asks herself the same
questions that I repeated to myself after a year and a half as a sojourner. In the poem, she writes,

Think of the long trip home.
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
Where should we be today?
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theatres?

"Home," for Bishop, was most likely Massachusetts, where her family had laid roots generations
prior. But what if, for the immigrant subject, "the strangest of theatres" is not the alien land, the
untrodden green, but the home itself? What if "watching strangers in a play" means peering into
one's own society? How could I feel rooted to a culture, to a place, if I had never eaten a turkey
on Thanksgiving, nor had presents under a Christmas tree, nor bowed to my elders on Lunar
New Year, nor ate rice cakes on \textit{chuseok}—holiday-less, tradition-less, history-less, floating.

So then comes the work of labor and construction, of building what I do not have, which
this thesis project attempts to begin. The late Toni Morrison, in her essay "Home," writes of
wishing to construct a literary home that can solve the question, "how to enunciate race while
depriving it of its lethal clinging?" Morrison spent her entire life invested in the task of creating a
"place already made for me, both snug and wide open." Yet, as Morrison's fiction amply
illustrates, such a place may exist, but cannot be separated from the outer world—the latent trauma of slavery and racism ends up killing many of her characters, even as they live in all-black communities. Thus, I wondered how race could become enunciated for Asian Americans in Southern California if it is the spawn of, as Ien Eng writes, "irreducible specificity." Was my initial assumption right, that Asian Americanness is too vast a concept, too diverse a community, to be contained in a conceptual "home" without bleeding out?

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On the second day of winter break, I always wake up and reorient myself to my surroundings: 70 degrees, shining sun, empty house. Breakfast is laid out for me, usually some fruit. It's peaceful, and I brew coffee and read poetry and make lunch, but in a few hours my first sister will come home, my second sister will come home, my exchange student guest will come home, and I will be crowded out.

During one winter break, I came home to find that my family decided to dog sit a chocolate labrador for a month, and having nothing to do during break, I walked it about five times each day. My neighbors across the street are a large, extended Indian family that owns a restaurant two minutes away called Delhi Kitchen, which I have frequently visited. I never spoke to any of them until I began to walk the dog, after which I greeted the porch-sitting family matriarch. My next door neighbor family is one our family knows well: Korean immigrants, with two children: a dentist and an engineer, both of whom tutored me in math. On the other side is a white family whose father is a construction manager, and whose sons skate all day and taught me
how to shoot BB guns at animals. Down the road I had a Filipino friend who had every single
new Xbox game and a never ending flow of Lumpia.

I will keep my San Diego framed and contained like this, a utopic racial imaginary for
my suburbia. Toni Morrison continues on, in "Home," to dream of "an open house, grounded, yet
generous in its supply of windows and doors." This is not a home in which race is irrelevant, but
is a home that sees and takes in abundantly, a home that is contained but not closed off, and a
home that can productively house Morrison's black cosmology. Thus, without my own sheltered
cosmology, without having a physical place of respite, how could I remain sane?

My Korean American cosmology, however, is by no means a paradise, and conflict
makes itself known almost immediately. By the third day of winter break, I will indubitably have
had a heated political argument with my mom, who constantly reminds me that when I was in
fourth grade, I completed a project in school about how illegal immigrants were harmful for our
country. Now, we argue about almost everything political: Barack Obama, gay people, abortion.
She concedes that Trump is immoral, but believes him to be divinely elected. I used to be so
frustrated that I couldn't beat her in arguments, as my Korean fluency couldn't carry over to the
political, but now I simply make my case, murmur in dissent, and then leave the house. This, of
course, does not even touch the fights we have about my future.

Wong May writes in her poem "I Dream of Saying Good-Bye to Mother," "I dream of
saying goodbye to mother/In all the airports of the world." I love my mother dearly, and she
herself says to me, 엄마니까 이런 잔소리를 하지. 엄마 아니면 누구가 해? It's because I'm
your mom that I'm scolding and nagging you. Who else will? I understand why she wants me to
go to law school, and why she holds the beliefs that she does, but after a week or so, I say the
same thing as May, except probably for different reasons. These constant conflicts contribute to a nagging sense that my time is up, that it is up to me to carve out a new home elsewhere.

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Perhaps the best illustration of San Diego occurred to me four years prior, during the second semester of my senior year of high school. On March 22nd, 2016, my friends and I drove from the suburbs into downtown and waited five hours to see Bernie Sanders talk at the Convention Center, an empty warehouse-like space that could house 15,000 bodies. News reports described the line as a full mile long.

Bernie's act was energizing, and utterly predictable: he didn't even have to say much, with the crowd exploding and drowning out every word after "free" and "legalize." However, I noticed that he said almost nothing about immigration, keeping his message in line with universal economic woes. I was not disappointed—what could Bernie Sanders know, I thought, about being an immigrant.

Two months later, on May 27th, I went to go see Trump at his rally, which was held at the same San Diego Convention Center. I marched with protestors, who seemed to outnumber the people in line, and followed a giant, inflatable effigy of Trump soundtracked by YG's pulsating anthem "Fuck Donald Trump." When the rally started, we slid in with a crowd made up largely of middle aged white couples. The opener, who looked uncannily similar to Sarah Palin, turned out to be Sarah Palin.
Trump, too, was utterly predictable in his spiel, but unlike Bernie, made immigration the message in his rally. "The Latinos love me," he declared, pointing out the five Latinx people in the crowd, who were holding up a sign saying "Latinos for Trump." "The Chinese love me," he said a few minutes later, again, pointing to the five people deep in the crowd holding up a "Chinese for Trump" sign. He kept his rally almost entirely about the Border, about immigrants, and I felt myself drowned out by the never ending, three syllable chants. Here I was, mere miles from the US-Mexico border, with the future President of the United States.

Years after that, a coworker told me that he saw San Diego as the "Florida of California," which is probably the best description of the city I have heard: the city is beautiful, sunny, expensive, diverse, and centrist. A city that pulled in just as many supporters for a Trump rally as it did for Bernie. A city that sits on two borders: one with Mexico, and one with the Pacific Ocean—a jumping off point, of sorts.

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Ha Jin, in his *The Writer as Migrant*, cleaves the definition of "homeland" as a container of a "home":

By definition, the word “homeland” has two meanings—one meaning refers to one’s native land, and the other to the land where one’s home is at present. In the past, the two meanings were easy to reconcile because “home” also signified “origin” and the past and the present were inseparable. In our time, however, the two meanings tend to form a dichotomy. (64)

Yes—physical home and native homeland have always been separate for me and the hundreds of millions of migrants around the world. However, I would like to throw in a third term to
complicate Jin's dichotomy a bit: for me, San Diego was never native country, and soon, it will no longer be my present home—it is merely a homebase, an idealized, nostalgic home that has less and less space for me.

My homebase is on the Pacific Rim, gazing westward, in a city hosting a navy base containing 24,000 military personnel and 10,000 civilian troops. In our elementary school sandboxes, I distinctly remember my friends and I trying to "dig to China," a common refrain in which if we went deep enough, we could hit the Orient, a topsy-turvy world. Yet in essence, this is what the Pacific Naval Fleet is gearing up towards: China. And, in a much different way, I am peering towards the same direction.

Just as the United States Navy, on nearby Coronado beach, flexes its muscles and shuttles its sailors off into the various corners of the world, I too see San Diego as a place where I can rest, replenish, and then take off once more. And most importantly, just like Toni Morrison, my "home" can always be constructed by my written words, words that can put me, as Wong May states, "on the spot" wherever I decide to go.

Even during my senior year of high school, unsure of where I would go to college, I knew I was on my way out. So now, four years later, I am presented with a dilemma: where will I go? Where can I go? For now, I am thinking Southeast Asia, or Europe, or New York, or Central Asia, or I guess practically anywhere. But to bring back Jenny Xie one last time, in her poem "Corfu," she writes, "I've grown lean from eating only the past." If one thing is for certain, this is where I am right about now, having spent days digesting and dissecting my past, my upbringing, my cognizance, and my emotions. I feel ready for something more.
Coda: Speculative Fictions

I've always tried to imagine an ideal space for people like me, an alive space in which we (a perpetually uncomfortable word) could feel rooted. Is it Irvine, the planned city in Southern California that is half Asian and predominantly upper middle class? In which studious Koreans attend youth orchestra, go to SAT hagwons, and get zoned to elite public schools? Is it Chinatown in Manhattan, Flushing in Queens, Sunset Park in Brooklyn, filled with working class immigrants desperate to get their kids into one of New York's specialized public high schools? Or will something different, something untethered to the obsession with excellence, develop naturally with the passage of time, as Asian Americans generationally settle into the historic pulse of American society?

Maybe this place is so hard to imagine because of the racial dissociation, the psychic load Asian Americans must bear, which has been written about by scholar Anne Anlin Cheng. In her book, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, she writes,

As both the targeted, racialized group in United States immigration policy and yet the least 'colored' group in racial debates, Asian Americans offer a charged site where American nationhood invests much of its contradictions, desires, and anxieties.

So thus this becomes my task, to dig deeper into the crevices of America's contradictions and anxieties in order to build on, as well as diverge from, the path that the first generation of Asian American artists and creatives have trod. Eventually, my hope is that this endeavor will cohere into a sense of "home" that sustains itself into the future.

I think John Yau tries to imagine this futurity in his 1995 short story "Hawaiian Cowboys," in which an Asian male protagonist and his white wife leave New York City to go on
vacation in Hawaii. Yau writes of the protagonist's initial observations when landing in the
country:

In Honolulu I kept looking at the couples, marveling at how many of them seemed, like
Janet and me, to be made up of people from different races and cultures. At times I
wondered why my parents didn't stop me here, why they decided to continue on their trip
to America, why they thought they should go to the mainland [...] Maybe not paradise,
but certainly better than the world they left behind.

Historically, Hawaii was the first place of settlement for Koreans in America, as 7,200 Koreans
arrived in Hawaii between 1903-1905 to work as farm laborers. Thus Hawaii as a setting, with its
multi-generational history of Asian immigrants, already reveals a sense of futurity about Asian
Americans to us on the mainland. Hawaii, in my imagination, and perhaps for Yau also, is Asian
American utopia, not in the sense of economic wellness or overall happiness, but in the sheer fact
that it is banal to be Asian and speak various dialects of English. I do not discount Hawaii's
history of indigenous enslavement and eradication, the forced migration of labor, and the
colorism still embedded in the islands, but where else in the United States are white people that
irrelevant? Where else are the mayors and senators and teachers and firefighters all some sort of
mixed Asian or Pacific Islander?

The Asian protagonist feels awed that he could even be comfortable in the United States.
Certainly, he is a privileged visitor in locales catered towards tourists, but nevertheless the point
remains: in Hawaii, multiculturalism is normative, and the protagonist can gaze at others without
feeling like an outsider.

The title of "Hawaiian Cowboys" comes from a scene in which the protagonist and his
wife chance upon a rodeo, in which they, unsurprisingly, see a coterie of Hawaiian cowboys:
Most of the men are dressed like cowboys, and almost all of them are Asian or Hawaiian. Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Polynesian, and Samoan. They're all sizes and shapes. Some are thin and wiry, while two are as big and thick as stone fireplaces.

Do this task of epistemological undoing, albeit one that is tinged with the masculine: first, remove the cowboy stereotype you may have, images of the Marlboro Man or Clint Eastwood. Then, envision the Asian cowboy, and overlay Polynesian with Chinese with Filipino with small with large with a smile with a frown or maybe with chagrin. Imagine this character, imagine this character's home, because I cannot.
Bibliography


