

## “We are all exiles”: Exile and Place in the Poetry of Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam and Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Boey Kim Cheng<sup>1</sup>  
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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### Abstract

Exile is a dominant theme and trope in the poetry of the pioneer generation of Anglophone Malaysian poets Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam and Shirley Geok-lin Lim. This essay traces the roots of exile in these three poets, exploring how the sense of displacement from cultural and political Malay hegemony has shaped their exilic poetics. It tracks the trajectory of their career and work to examine how exile governs their readings of place and belonging, of heritage and home. The essay follows Ee's and Lim's emigrant routes and examines how physical separation from their homeland opens up liminal spaces that their poetry negotiates, and foregrounds issues of ethnicity, nationality and diaspora that their post-migration work engages with. For Wong, a stayer, exile becomes a poetic strategy for dealing with the adversities facing the Anglophone writer in Malaysia. It also enables him to deal with problematic issues of identity and belonging, and view them from the distant perspective of remote classical Chinese poets. For Ee, Wong and Lim, exile as theme and metaphor, and as a poetic strategy, becomes the inescapable lens through which they see Malaysia and their history and identity as Straits-born Chinese or Peranakans, descendants of inter-marriages between Chinese immigrants and Malay inhabitants.

### Keywords

Malaysian poetry, pioneer generation, exile, place, identity, home

In the global age of transnational mobility and flexible identity, where it is increasingly common to have multiple affiliations with two or more cultures and countries, the idea of exile seems outdated and remote, the separation of self and homeland rarely the irrevocable or permanent state it was for poets like Ovid, Su Shi, or more recently, Joseph Brodsky and Gao Xingjian. In his poem “The Prince of Quotidian” the Irish poet Paul Muldoon mocks those who use the word “exile” too freely; it is an affront to real exiles “the likes of Brodsky or Padilla,” who experienced a profoundly painful and often doomed separation from their

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<sup>1</sup> **Boey Kim Cheng** has published five collections of poetry, a travel memoir entitled *Between Stations*, and *Gull Between Heaven and Earth*, a historical novel about the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu. He teaches Creative Writing at Nanyang Technological University. Email: kcboey@ntu.edu.sg.

homeland (36). Its obsolescence notwithstanding, “exile” still conjures up that fractured condition arising from a displacement of self from home, be it involuntary or voluntary. In the poetry of three key Malaysian Anglophone poets, Ee Tiang Hong (1933-1990), Wong Phui Nam (1935-) and Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1944-), the figure of exile looms large, and governs the voice and thematic concerns of their work. Theirs is a poetry of exile, embodying its motifs and tropes in a poetics of displacement and absence, displaying a Joycean *non-serviam* and resistance, and the motivational source for this exilic poetics is what Edward Said has described in *Reflections on Exile* as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (173).

Much has been written about the social and political conditions that have wrought this exilic stance and poetics among these Anglophone Malaysian writers in the post-colonial nation-building period. Their hopes and aspirations of a truly multicultural Malaysia where writers would be recognised and supported for working in their chosen language were dashed with the path the country took in the wake of independence. With the socio-political privileging of the Malay majority, and the attendant institution of Malay as the national language, minority groups, including the Anglophone literary community, were relegated to the margins, and deprived of opportunities and voice that should have been their birth-right in a newly independent, democratic and multilingual nation. The May 13<sup>th</sup> 1969 racial riots and the subsequent implementation of the New Economic Policy which enhanced Malay ascendancy worsened the situation for minorities, and Malay hegemony in the literary arts meant further disenfranchisement for minority writers. Lim states: “the May 13 riots provided the bloody revolution that changed Malaysia from the ideal of a multicultural egalitarian future... to the Malay-dominant race-preferential practice in place today” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 209). Ee, for whom the writer’s role “is to define oneself in context” and “to awake to one’s possibilities and to stake one’s freedom,” registers his dismay at the nationalist tide: “Poet and nation do not always speak the same language. In that situation, nationalism is no more than the bawling of a perverse child demanding that it alone be heard, or it will mess up the whole place” (“Malaysian Poetry in English” 69). In contrast to Singapore poets like Edwin Thumboo, who collaborates in the nation-building project in the immediate post-colonial period with a nationalist orientation in his poetic themes and language, Malaysian Anglophone writers are estranged by the cultural nationalism which excludes other post-independence literary formations. Writers who have chosen to write in English, the colonial language, albeit with local inflections, are “open to the charges of being a reactionary, if not an antinational” (Chin Holaday 140). Having chosen to rewrite English into a poetic language all their own, the difficulties and challenges notwithstanding, they now feel punished for it. Ee puts it grimly:

As things stand, writers in English languish on the periphery of national development, spurned by those in control of the production and distribution of knowledge, excluded from participating in a politics of consensus, from contributing to the weaving of a rich and variegated fabric of national life. (“Literature and Liberation” 19)

For Ee, Wong and Lim, the multicultural milieu of Malaya which, before the separation of Singapore from the Malay Federation in 1965, was the perfect environment for cultural ferment and artistic creation, became an aborted dream. Increasingly, they felt a sense of betrayal. Wong laments:

The hoped for Malayan poetry has... turned out to be a marginalised and depleted poetry. But, happily, it has found its roots elsewhere – in Singapore where it shows vigorous signs of maturing into a first flowering that will be seen... to be the beginning of a national tradition in Singaporean poetry. (“In the Beginning” 93)

In Wong’s view, politics and greed have turned Malaysia into a “wasteland” in which “there are not available elements which an artist can draw together to create for the people an integrating vision of a possible inner life” (*Ways of Exile* 137). Wong shares Ee’s bleak view of Malaysia as wasteland and wilderness; both use the latter word in the titles of their collections – Ee’s *Myths for a Wilderness* and Wong’s *Against the Wilderness* – reflecting the sterile literary ecosystem the Malaysian Anglophone writer finds him or herself working in. Dismissing the options of either succumbing to a nationalist poetics or the alternative of protest poetry, Wong sees that the only “option to the Malaysian wasteland is to opt out” (*Ways of Exile* 138). For Wong “opting out” translates into “lapsing into silence” and living in a state of internal exile (*Ways of Exile* 138); for Ee and Lim it led to emigration, which approximates a kind of exile, since the voluntary departure is dictated by conditions that threaten one’s freedom and integrity. As Ee states, it is also ultimately a form of protest: “Malaysian writers have chosen to protest by leaving the country, preferring the uncertainties of exile to the certainties of being humiliated, overtly or in many subtle ways” (“Literature and Liberation” 20). Ee speaks of others like his contemporary Wong Phui Nam, “who have chosen to remain in the country, but their being ostracised by those responsible for the dissemination of knowledge and culture makes them exiles all the same” (“Literature and Liberation” 20). For these three pioneering Malaysian Anglophone writers, the rising tide of Malay nationalism all but destroyed their vision of a post-Independence multicultural Malaysia, and their response to the predicament, to the overwhelming displacement and marginalisation experienced is self-imposed exile, in actual and imaginary terms.

Exile in the works of these three poets looms large as trope and theme. For Ee and Lim, the decision to emigrate became arguably the most decisive influence

on their career and work, and the push rather than pull factor gives it a plangent note of exile. Exile becomes the inescapable lens through which they see Malaysia, and more specifically Malacca, their place of birth, as well as their history and identity as Straits-born Chinese or Peranakans, descendants of inter-marriages between Chinese immigrants and Malay inhabitants. It also shapes their new identity as migrants in their host countries, and generates a liminal way of seeing and being, creating a bilocale poetics that evaluates one place in terms of another. Wong, though a stayer, and still resolutely Malaysian, has struck a strong note of exile in his work from the beginning, perhaps much more so than Ee and Lim. He has cast himself as an “inner émigré,” to use Seamus Heaney’s phrase (91), one who though has chosen to remain rather than choose a diasporic route, living in a state approximating the mental conditions of exile, alienated at different levels: from the hegemonic Malay nationalism; from the urban and capitalist wasteland that has taken over the country; from his own hybrid heritage, and from the language that he has chosen to work with. In his essay on how Northern Irish poets coped with the pressures of politics during the violent political crisis in the 1970s and 1980s, Seamus Heaney shows how an exilic poetics was a strategy to deal with “the complexity of the present conditions” and explains “the large number of poems in which the Northern Irish writer views the world from a great spatial or temporal distance...” (*Finders Keepers* 119). Likewise, the exilic path affords the Malaysian Anglophone writer the distance and perspective from which to view his or her relationship with the country. This essay will explore how exile governs the readings of place and belonging, of heritage and home, in the three poets. There is a haunted, eerily vacant aspect to their readings of place, as if through the lens of exile, place has become transformed into something more abstract, disembodied and former habitats turned into sites that are longer lived in, all but erased of human presence.

Ee’s emigration to Australia in 1975 and Lim’s move to America in 1969 gave their work a diasporic focus and trajectory. Henceforth, place and memory would come to acquire a dominant focus in their work. As migrant writers in the host country, they have had to negotiate and position themselves in new spaces, their “affiliative identity” engaged in the process of settlement and assimilation (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 295). At the same time that they are forming new ties and readings of place, they inescapably look back to the originary home, to the lives and places left behind. Thus, they inhabit a liminal state and develop a double consciousness, straddling binaries of host country/original home, new culture and language/natal culture and mother tongue, present/past, reality/memory and displacement/place. James Clifford observes that diaspora cultures “mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (255). Even as they embrace their new citizenship and reinvent themselves as Asian Australian and Asian American respectively, Ee and Lim still often write as

émigrés rather than new citizens of the host country, and their sense of exile gravitates towards the lost homeland, embodied in the image of Malacca that haunts their work.

Ee is Malaysia's exilic poet par excellence. Emigration only confirms the sense of exile that informs his work from the beginning. *I of the Many Faces*, published in 1960, is filled with images of distance, departure and flight. In a slim collection of about twenty poems there are five poems of travel and transit, revealing the lonely entrapment and disenchantment of a young English poet struggling in a Malay-dominated culture: "Too late, my words,/ futile, fly away like a breath/ of emigratory birds" (11). The three poems that open *Myths for a Wilderness*, published a year after his migration, form a spatial reading of Malacca that is troublingly empty, ghostly. "Herren Street, Malacca" provides a strangely disconsolate representation of the post-colonial spaces of the historical town: "Gharry and palanquin are silent./ The narrow street describes/ Decades of ash earth" (*Myths for a Wilderness* 1). The town seems to be inhabited only by "Babas" (Peranakan men) who "Gaze at Fords and Mercedes" and who are haunted by "memories/ Grave as a museum" (*Myths for a Wilderness* 1). History seems to be over, or has left the town behind; there is no post-colonial valorisation or reconstruction of place and history. "Portuguese Hamlet, Malacca" reveals an even more stark and desolate sense of place. The mestizo population, descendants of the Portuguese "conquistadores," are reduced to "a hundred or so fishermen" eking out a living in "these last acres of sand" (*Myths for a Wilderness* 2). Far from being a picture of pastoral or rural idyll, the poem reinforces the sense of history as being over, the descriptive details of the place focussing on the old men in "loose striped pyjamas,/ scanning the expanse of sea and mud ..." (*Myths for a Wilderness* 2). These hybrid people, like the Straits Chinese, have been marginalised by the monocultural and monolingual attitude of the governing Malay majority. Even more pessimistic is the situation conveyed by the third poem "Tranquerah, Malacca." It is arguably the first poem in Malaysian poetry to speak of the Chinese diaspora from Malaysia – the silent departures of the Chinese community who have for generations made the country their home. Casually, the poem refers to "A friend gone overseas,/ And now reluctant to return/ After a wonderful time" (*Myths for a Wilderness* 4). As a result of these departures, and of the street names being changed from English to Malay, letters are "redirected/ Or stamped Address Unknown." There is no underpinning permanence of place, no hints of a stable relationship between place and identity. The official language policy extends to altering place names to Malay and this has further intensified the sense of displacement. The silent diaspora is marked by change and absence in the landscape:

The long road seems the same  
Despite a neighbour's disappearance,

New houses, new faces in the neighbourhood.  
Endurance is the hallmark of the stone  
That bears the fickle traffic,  
The purposes unfulfilled, coming and going. (*Myths for a Wilderness* 4)

Despite the place name in its title, the poem offers few details of place; in fact, it is to all intents and purposes empty of any signs of human presence, despite the new houses and faces; the placelessness is enhanced as the town empties with the diasporic passage of the Chinese community.

Like the friend mentioned in the poem, Ee chose to leave his country. The intolerable situation in post-1969 Malaysia for non-Malay groups pushed the poet into an act of emigration that resembles exile in its intense pain and loss, articulated in the poem “Exile” from *Tranqueras*:

He finally chose  
the only way out  
for the sake of all  
he held most dear,  
left one quiet evening,  
ash-grey,  
incognito,  
dirt on tarmac. (26-27)

The emotional stress wrought by self-imposed exile is such that Ee has to have recourse to the third-person perspective to convey his diasporic narrative. In his post-emigration work, the strong note of pain and loss becomes even more excruciating, reaching a climax in his posthumous collection *Nearing the Horizon*. The air of pained resignation, a sense of irrevocability as the poet comes to terms with the gravity of his action, is, if anything, more intense a decade on. The voluntary exile has to suffer traumatic consequences and to deal with them in his post-emigration life and work. It is telling that years after becoming an Australian citizen, despite the processes of assimilation and acculturation, he still sees himself as “a hopeless case – a Baba/ born and bred in Malacca, Malaysia, now exiled, in/ of all places, Australia, which is farther east/ and right down under” (*Nearing the Horizon* 13). *Nearing the Horizon* is a tallying of the losses and costs his act of voluntary exile incurred, and poem after poem finds Ee still needing to convince himself that exile was the right move. “Lesson From Childhood” marks the day the momentous decision was made:

I remember the day,  
our minds made up –  
enough of this nonsense –  
for all the generations of  
our history, we chose to leave;

and not a day longer,  
 or lingering farewell.  
 For what was there to stay? (*Nearing the Horizon* 28)

For a poem that begins with the injunction to “cut this rope straight through/ in one brave stroke,” the question plants a strong contrapuntal chord of ambivalence and ambiguity.

For Ee the act of uprooting and departure left an absence and void that nothing in his new life or home can fill. The pain of exile stems from the separation, from the memory of the lost homeland. Emigration usually carries with it optimistic hope of a better life, a better vision of home, but in Ee’s case the exilic tone of resignation is unmistakable. Australia is supposed to be “Canaan and cornucopia” which should allow the poet to “pause to think, to make/ a future for another age,” but the promise is nullified by the pain of exile from home and a sense of distance and alienation from adopted home (*Nearing the Horizon* 39). Of Perth, the city the poet has chosen as his exilic abode, the poet complains: “The city has no centre, focal landmark,/ no Place de la Concorde, Padang Merdeka, Tien An Men,/ no particular square, terrace, public park” (*Nearing the Horizon* 40). The succession of place-names, with Ee’s birthplace as the centre, reveals the sense of placelessness besieging the *déraciné* poet in his adopted city. Ee plants his pastoral idyll on the banks of the Swan River, away from the oppressive politics of Malaysia: “no looking back to brood, and not too far ahead,/ just the opposite foreshore, Bassendean.// And the Swan, quiet, deathly pale at evening” (*Nearing the Horizon* 40). The poet vows to make a home from home, to establish his credentials and passage to naturalisation. However, the dark note in the last line all but negates the resolve, suggesting the price for this peace is the irrevocable separation from the homeland and death of the exilic self.

In “Resolution” Ee makes a similar movement towards firming up his resolution to stay exiled: “Here, halfway up the Swan, I chose/ to build my home, for the last time/ having to come to terms with my new home” (*Nearing the Horizon* 41). However, the resignation is unmistakable. The homesteading activities, far from grounding the exilic writer in a habitat that he can call home, exacerbates his sense of not-being-at-home. Malacca is a ghostly presence that still haunts his life as an Australian, or rather, an absence that reminds him of his exilic status. All true exiles have an abiding image of home in their work, and for Ee Malacca is that immutable home. In “The Burden” the longing for the lost homeland triggers a dream return to his childhood, to a memory of his “father singing on and on –/ one-man singer, dancer, violin, gong and drum/ mother asleep, after a whole day’s housework” (*Nearing the Horizon* 19). The poet sees himself as a “tethered calf” who became a “maddened buffalo” who “chose to leave the herd” (*Nearing the Horizon* 19). The dream imagery is interrupted with an

injunction: “Sever the cord straight through/ in one brave stroke, and then/ forget, (my mother used to say),/ or else the heart will fray” (*Nearing the Horizon* 19). The love and guilt are only too palpable here. In the third part of the poem, Ee is weeding his garden with a view of “the sheen of the Swan” and listening to strains of “a lonely violin” when the music blends with the song his father sang, and the memory of his childhood undercuts his current existence in Australia; the present and the past are brought together in an act of bilocation (*Nearing the Horizon* 20). Within the reconciliatory space of the poem, Ee’s father “is alive, in a laterite grave/ in Bukit Piatu, in his family grove/ of green and brown tembusu” (*Nearing the Horizon* 20). The imaginary return erases the boundaries between past and present, Perth and Malacca, and the poet comes to inhabit a liminal state: “And I am here, and there, and back again./ wallowing in mud, cool slush, this waterhole/ my home, in the freedom of another wilderness” (*Nearing the Horizon* 20).

In his essay “A Dream of Glorious Return,” Salman Rushdie observes that the longing to return home is part of the condition of all exiles. Ee’s post-migration work is governed by this inclination towards the lost home. Often the real and imaginary returns become indistinguishable. “Melaka” is a case in point. It begins with the poet “Returning/ empty-handed, incognito/ to visit old haunts”; the opening words establish the vacant and hollow feel, as the poet’s return triggers “no ceremonial/ welcome” or sense of homecoming (*Nearing the Horizon* 18). He has become an alien in his own country: “Faces I meet in the street/ betray no recognition” (*Nearing the Horizon* 18). The spatial referents are fragmented, sketchy, providing no coherent sense of place, only “remnants of empire,/ monumental ruins” (*Nearing the Horizon* 18). There are no personal memories evoked, all suggestions of emotional attachments to the place suppressed. Only in the last stanza, when Ee’s mythologising impulse invokes the founding fathers, and the rich palimpsestic history of the place, can the poet feel a sense of arrival and homecoming in his place of birth that is also the site of rupture and exile:

Parameswara,  
Albuquerque, Van Diemen,  
Raffles, Minto, and  
all those faces in the street,  
the generations before,  
the faces that will come –

makers of my eternal city. (*Nearing the Horizon* 18)

The affirmative ending is somewhat abrupt, betraying Ee’s urgent need to reconcile place and his exilic self. The recitation of historical personae grants him distance from the current political situation; it asserts the composite, layered



multi-ethnic origins of Malaysia, and in so doing question the Malay spelling “Melaka” for the historic site, thus undermining the monolithic notion of an exclusively Malay Malaysia.

Ee’s diasporic status grants him the distance to see the complex, fluid and hybrid nature of his natal place. It also allows him to contextualise his Chineseness. In *Not Speaking Chinese*, Ien Ang argues that for the Chinese diaspora “their diasporic Chineseness is still linked to their obvious biographical rootedness in the cultural formations of the territorial centre of the ancestral ‘homeland’” (27). Ang’s observation is applicable to writers like Wong Phui Nam, who holds an ideal image of Chinese culture and homeland in his poems, but not so to Ee. In “Tranquerah Road” Ee affirms the localised, unique, place-centred nature of his Chinese identity:

The road remains  
for those who are left,  
a fragment for us exiled,  
unacknowledged generation,  
a long frayed chapter,  
poor adjunct of Heeren Street.  
But only it, there, here,  
not some remote village in China  
once upon a time  
was all the earth and sea and sky  
and rainbow, golden dream  
we owned. (*Tranquerah* 66)

The poem maps a possible homecoming route for the exile, tracing it to the hybrid Straits Chinese community in Malacca that has evolved from a long history of settlement and inter-marriage with the Malay population. Tranquerah and Heeren Streets are real, physical sites invested with emotional and emblematic significance. Bukit China, “the largest remaining traditional Chinese cemetery in world” located just outside the old town of Malacca, is another (Cariter 89). According to the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), the history of the site stemmed from the 14<sup>th</sup>-century marriage of a Chinese princess to the Malacca sultan; the hill’s name derived from the Chinese contingent that followed the princess and settled around the site. Development plans in the 1980s to convert the cemetery for commercial and residential uses triggered a conservation campaign among the Chinese, “demonstrating not only Bukit China’s continuing cultural significance for the Chinese community, but its symbolism as the singular site in Malaysia to embody the history of the nation” (Cariter 90). Ee envisions the hill as a real and emblematic place of Chinese Malaysian identity:

The hill remains,

in the order of things,  
the unwritten understanding  
among men and nations,  
reminder of successive voyages,  
goodwill missions and exchanges,  
token of a permanent settlement,  
beyond negotiation. (*Nearing the Horizon* 28)

The exile reconnects with his ancestral place, a site of loss and mourning which is also a place of remembrance and solace, where he can experience a rare, coherent moment of homecoming.

Ee once said: “We are all exiles, who will not rest, but will dream, and travel, seeking an alternative reality, a better future” (Bennett). His younger compatriot Shirley Geok-lin Lim belongs to this exilic company. Although not as obsessive as Ee in the use of the word “exile” to describe her migration to the US, Lim sees the separation from her place of birth in exilic terms. In “Sister Exile” from *Do You Live In?* (2015), she sees her younger self in a young woman migrant in Hong Kong: “I see and do not see myself in her. I’d sat on the steps of stairs in another city, sick and afraid, but I had never wept – those salty fluids wrenched from the gut and chest would not rise for me...” (68). Although migration does not entail the punitive state that comes with involuntary exile, it still brings “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted,” to quote Edward Said’s reflection on exile (173). This rift is palpably present in all of Lim’s work, despite her credentials as a successful Asian American writer-scholar. Said’s insight further illuminates Lim’s predicament: “The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever” (*Reflections on Exile* 173). This note of loss is audible in “Riding to California,” its lines registering the alienation suffered by the migrant, severed from communal and ancestral ties: “If you come to a land with no ancestors/ to bless you, you have to be your own/ ancestor.” The poem reveals the resistance to assimilation, and the migrant’s sense of exclusion and marginalisation: “The good thing about being Chinese on Amtrack/ is no one sits next to you. The bad thing is/ you sit alone all the way to Irvine” (*What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* 64).

Lim’s exilic displacement and loss finds assuagement in an imaginary Malacca that has emerged in her poetry and narrative prose. Tellingly, it is a Malacca that seems disembodied, its spatiality becoming more auratic than material, “a fugitive presence,” to use her own words, not so much “a town... but a familiar spirit” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 10). Lim’s birth town acquires a spectral quality, even upon actual visits; it is more a site of memory than a real place. In “Visiting Malacca” she visits her ancestral house on Heeren Street. It is, as the title underscores, a visit rather than a return, highlighting the fugitive nature of the relationship between self and place. Packed into four septets, the spatial

details reconstruct the hybrid style of Peranakan house, which fuses Western neo-classical architecture with traditional Chinese motifs:

Someone lives in the old house:  
 Gold-leaf carving adorns the doors.  
 Black wooden stairs still stand  
 And wind like arms of slender women  
 Leading to the upper floors.  
 It is as I remembered,  
 But not itself, not empty, clean. (*Listening to the Singer* 113)

The stanzas act as building blocks to give solidity to the ancestral home, but there is a gap between the place and architecture of memory and concrete reality of the house as it stands. Despite the vivid descriptive details that embody the current dwelling, it is ghosted by a sense of absence:

Someone has saved the old house.  
 It is no longer dark with opium  
 Or with children running crowded  
 Through passageways. The well has been capped,  
 The moon-windows boarded.  
 Something of China remains,  
 Although ancestral family is gone. (*Listening to the Singer* 113)

The house, supposedly a repository of familial memories, has been restored and altered, its alien and strange identity repelling the emigrant's affiliations. No memories are triggered by the visit. All Lim could glean is a distant echo of Chinese heritage. Now that it no longer houses the family, it is no longer home but a reminder of family dispersal and of the Chinese diaspora from China and more recently from Malacca.

In *Among the White Moon Faces* Lim gives an account of the effect of seeing her grandfather's funeral cortege: "This moment imprinted on me the sense of Malacca as my home, a sense I have never been able to recover anywhere else in the world. To have felt the familiar once is always to feel its absence after" (42). This absence gives "Visiting Malacca" a haunted feel, and the house becomes a site of loss and pain, as the dreams of it "leak slowly like sap/ Welling from a wound" (*Singer* 113). Lim confesses she is "losing/ Ability to make myself at home" (*Ibid*). The visit does not turn into a homecoming, only a confirmation of exile from place. The house, in its current incarnation, is emptied of the past, and the poet finds no narrative in which she could fit in: "I have dreamed of ruined meaning,/ And am glad to find none" (*Ibid*). It is impossible for the exile to return to the place of origin that is also the place of rupture.

In Ee's work Bukit China is the locus of his Straits Chinese identity. He locates his father's "laterite grave" and emblemizes it as a site or source of familial and ethnic coherence. Lim's "Bukit China" is much more personal; it is an act of expiation and mourning for her father who "did not live for my returning." The poem enacts a belated ritual for the émigré daughter, to appease her father and the ancestral spirits, as much as her own conscience:

Bless me, spirits, I am returning,  
Stone marking my father's bones,  
I light the joss. A dead land.  
On noon steepness smoke ascends  
Briefly. Country is important,  
Is important. This knowledge I know  
If it will rise with smoke, with the dead. (*Listening to the Singer* 83)

The sacramental site and rite turn death and forgetfulness into remembering and healing, the reiteration of the predicate in "Country is important,/ Is important" underlining the vital importance of the sense of place to the poet's sense of self. Through a performative utterance Lim enacts a spatial poetics that binds her father, her ancestors, and her country of birth together: "My father's daughter, I pour/ No brandy before memory/ But labour, constantly labour,/ Bearing sunwards grave bitter smoke" (*Listening to the Singer* 83).

In "Bukit China" and poems that make real or imaginary returns to Malacca, Lim seeks reconciliation with her parents and with her place of birth, but invariably her visits uncover signs of absence, death and dereliction in a landscape deeply marked by diaspora. In "Mango" she observes, as she is driven "home through narrow, rewritten Malacca," "broken Chinese houses whose sons/ and grandsons have left for Australia" (*Listening to the Singer* 121). The irony is poignant; the poet herself is part of Malaysian Chinese diaspora. Her own exilic disconnection is discernible, the transient nature of her visit suggested by the car drive. In end the only solace is derived from the taste of green mango: "a memory of tart/ unripeness sweetened by necessities" (*Listening to the Singer* 121). Even the Proustian moment is spoiled by the ineluctable sense of exilic displacement that ends the poem: "Where do we go from here, carrying/ those sad eyes under the mango trees,/ with our sauces, our petty hauntings?" (*Listening to the Singer* 121).

In his essay John Berger comments: "Every migrant knows in his heart of hearts that it is impossible to return." He adds that even if a physical return is possible, the migrant "does not truly return, because he himself has been so deeply changed by his emigration" (67). For Ee and Lim, true homecoming is impossible; the act of voluntary exile ensures the rupture is irreparable and their diasporic trajectory means that "home is no longer just one place." Lim's work, since her Commonwealth Prize-winning debut *Crossing the Peninsula*, is governed by the axis of departure and return, but in her more recent poems this has evolved

into a looser cosmopolitanism. This exilic transnationalism is akin to the spatial detachment which Said speaks about, quoting Eric Auerbach, who in turn got the words from Hugo of St. Victor: “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land” (*Reflections* 185). The poems in Lim’s 2010 collection *Walking Backwards* embody this spatial practice that confuses home and the world, in which a transnational mobility and exilic cosmopolitanism reinforces each other:

Blue skies and ocean air  
The same as home, leaving home is mere practice  
For leaving all, all the leavings learned  
Again and again, until goodbye becomes  
Addictive, last look behind, first look forward,  
What you carry everywhere. (28)

In the title poem, Lim celebrates a liminal way of being, her displaced condition giving her access to a large community of border-crossers:

I am walking backwards into China  
Where everyone looks like me  
And no one is astonished at my passport  
Declares I am foreign, only  
Envious at my good luck. Speechless,  
Without a tongue of China,  
I remember Grandfather’s hands, Grandma’s  
Tears. On Causeway Bay, ten thousand  
Cousins walk beside me, a hundred  
Thousand brothers and sisters. (*Walking Backwards* 35)

The ambulatory movement in the direction of the poet’s ancestral homeland grants her a moment of solidarity with the people on the move, the community who commute regularly between borders. She is at home in between borders, her own hybrid nature, the complex, composite nature of her make-up – Peranakan, Chinese, Malaysian, Asian-American, with multiple attachments to places like Singapore and Hong Kong – and her own émigré state preventing her from belonging to any one place. Significantly, the crossing poem does not end in arrival at the Chinese border but perpetuates the state of transit. In another poem, Lim does “not enter” the “celestial kingdom” but chooses to “sit here. Safe, on the wrong side/ Of the border” (38). She has come to define herself through ambivalence and liminality, and in so doing has turned home into a state of perpetual displacement. In another poem she admits she has “thought hard

about/ Where I am going. Lost./ And where I want to go. Home” (*Walking Backwards* 48).

The theme of home is a preoccupation in Lim’s work. If anything, it has become more foregrounded and cogent in her recent work. However, the idea of home has been liberated from identifying spatial referents; “Home Stretch,” from *Ars Poetica for the Day* (2012), far from falling into the homecoming trajectory that informs earlier poems like “Visiting Malacca,” is a improvisatory riff on the word “home”:

Homing in, homely, homesick—  
a word raising tremors  
and combats – returning  
and leaving, funeral  
and rest home, a word with no  
stillness, no stand still.  
Homing pigeons, home schooled,  
home cooking. Homing  
device and where the heart is—  
neither infallible  
for the home stretch. (85)

The soundings taken are metaphysical and linguistic, rather than grounded in a particular place or bound by spatial makers. They suggest that for a migrant writer, home is never a given, neither fixed nor stable, and the act of homecoming can at best be found in words. In her earlier work, this precarious knowledge would have been conveyed through the narrative of experience or memory. Here, its meaning is indefinitely deferred through verbal play. Another poem that records this shift in Lim’s spatial practice is “For a Poet”:

Why would you ask for a poem about home  
That does not use the word “home”? Does one  
Say fuck is not for fucking, love  
Is not for loving, unless you are doomed

To a hopeless desire in which words  
Can no longer mean, speech cannot any  
Longer speak, such longing is so over-  
Layered with doubt and hate, and cursed

Doubleness, that to say is to unsay,  
To write is to underwrite, undermine,  
Undetermine, that unhome is where  
You are at home in earnest, in play. (*Ars Poetica for the Day* 71)

Where earlier poems would have tracked the idea of home to Malacca or Santa Barbara where she lives, the poem now turns to irony, to an epistemological and linguistic procedure to sound out its meaning or its ineffability. This unravels the complexities and contradictions of being a diasporic writer, for whom the question of home is fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence.

Wong Phui Nam's work interrogates the issues of home and belonging as fiercely as Ee and Lim, but more than the other two, he has mobilised the trope of exile to examine the political, social and literary contexts which have worked against the minority writer since independence, especially the Malaysian Anglophone writer. The words "exile" and "wilderness" occur with obsessive frequency through his work. In a review of Wong's collected poems *An Acre of Day's Glass*, Lim remarks that "its pages offer what seems to be an unrelenting vision of a 'stony rubbish' wasteland (phrases Wong used to signify the cultural and physical landscape, and inscape, of a colonized, post-independence, Chinese migrant, ethnic fragmented, *place*)" ("Sparkling Glass"). There is an air of existential bleakness that Wong's landscapes exude, the Eliot-like wasteland exhaustion muffling any distinct topographical feature or colour. The poems seem to find root in desolate locales, inhospitable places, liminal zones where the land loses its definition to something more fluid, more indeterminate. Right from his first collection *How the Hills Are Distant*, the tone is one of unrelenting resignation tinged with despair, and the psychogeography is distinctly symbolist, strongly reminiscent of Eliot:

I feel out of the verges of the swamps  
in the body's tides, out of the bones  
of an ancient misery,  
the dead stir with this advent of rain  
and, in a landscape long held  
in the contours of anguish,  
hedges, and barbed wire,  
catch the glimmer of their subdued presences. (*An Acre of Day's Glass* 11)

This a terminal landscape, its imagery and voice blurring the topographical contours, reflecting the inner or psychic landscape. Wong's stark evaluation of Malaysia as a cultural and spiritual wasteland feeds into the way he sees the landscape and his place in it. Just as Ovid in banishment depicts the country around Tomis as barbarian territory, Wong's exilic stance and lens render Malaysia's fecund tropical landscape into an unruly, hostile wilderness rinsed of human presence. Liminal coastal imagery abounds, conveying an overwhelming sense of detritus, of fragmentation and gloom: "There is upon the beachhead of my sleep/ a beating tide that toils for the cast up, unburied dead" (*An Acre of Day's Glass* 33); "The sea pulls back from its mangrove edges/ from the houses subverted into mud" (*An Acre of Day's Glass* 101); "We have not stanchd the

tides yet/ in our closing sides against the pushing waters,/ stopped up fissures in our blooded earth” (*An Acre of Day’s Glass* 178). The sense of threat and fragility is unremittingly palpable, the self failing to find any purchase in the shifting, uncertain littoral ground.

In the titular sonnet sequence from *Against the Wilderness*, Wong evokes his ancestors’ arrivals from China in Malaya and their struggles to eke out a new life in what seems to be an inhospitable climate and land. There is no joy in arrival, no excitement in discovering a new life in a new country. Instead, the ghostly personae speak in drained voices, and again the spectral imagery of the land dominates the poetic cartography. Bukit China, which for Ee and Lim is the hallowed ground of ancestral memory, is seen as a place of shipwreck and exile in “Bukit China 1,” as the migrant character speaks of his plight:

So long of the sea, I became its aborted creature  
dropped from the land, from the soil of rooted community  
bled to a shocked exhaustion. Wasting into a numbness  
that grew malignant as an unease eating into bone,  
I came adrift. In time, I shed the stink of loess  
in waters that turned corrosive under an open sun  
and, naked, caught the desolation of an empty quarter.

(*An Acre of Day’s Glass* 164)

*Against the Wilderness* was published more than thirty years after *The Hills Are Distant*, but there is no significant change in spatial poetics, or the readings of place. If anything, the sense of exile has intensified and the corollary sense of place has darkened further. “Bukit China 2” continues the narrative of Chinese diaspora in Malaya with the motifs of shipwreck and of surrender to the corrosive forces of the land:

When my sea-blackened junk crumbled for its weight  
of salt-gutted timber as it sat dry on a spit  
of mud, I gave myself over to the thought  
the sea had retched me up for final dissolution  
in the waiting earth. In the flesh, I sensed the flood  
gathering in the soil already of lapping oblivion.

(*An Acre of Day’s Glass* 165)

The littoral landscape of “mangroves fecund in sea-snakes, in mudskippers” betoken dissolution of culture and self as the Chinese settle, become assimilated through marriages with the natives, and become absorbed into the soil: “My flesh would find continuance in the moist salt wombs/ of native women and lave secreted into this hill/ a clutch of bones which no transfigured life would hatch” (*An Acre of Day’s Glass* 165). Bukit China, far from being the vital place of Chinese



diasporic history, a place where the Straits Chinese can trace their roots and origins, becomes a site of loss and oblivion, where the ghost-speakers cry in the wilderness for their “lost, drowned selves” (*An Acre of Day’s Glass* 167). Noticing a focal shift in Wong’s later poems, Lim observes:

The later poems, while still embedded in landscapes vividly and obsessively abstracted as suburban decadent, earthly corrupted, painful and threatening, swampy, oppressive, etc, have moved beyond the western, Eliotic discourse of the ‘wasteland’ to a more nationally and locally engaged narrative of migrant histories where the wasteland becomes imaginatively re-symbolized as the tropical ‘wilderness’ that enveloped and transformed the waves of immigrants to Malaysia. (“Sparkling Glass”)

The destination for the migrant is not a better, civilised world, but resembles more a barbarian world full of uncertainty and danger. “Arrival,” the fourth poem in the sequence, is bitterly ironic:

Language here turns gibberish, resistant as brown earth,  
as raw green scrub that over it senselessly runs.  
What people are these? Boatmen, coolies, demons,  
flotsam on the tides that have flooded over the edge  
of the netherworld? I saw that coming in,  
jungle pouring out mountains into the sea’s mouth,  
holding the world’s gloom, its inhospitable spirit. (*An Acre of Day’s Glass* 166)

The unruly terrain bristles with menace, is more heart of darkness than tropical paradise, the culture that the migrant brings with him disintegrating into “gibberish.” Ovid’s famous lament in exile is apposite here: “I am a barbarian here, understood by nobody.”

Wong’s poems, though predominantly rural and littoral in setting, can hardly be called pastoral. They offer no idyllic retreats, no bucolic kampongs or seaside revels. There is no peace or exultation in the natural landscape, no vivid descriptions that reveal any love or affinity with the country. The descriptions on the whole are rather general, abstract, devoid of specific, minute details – names of flora and fauna are sparse, and conspicuously absent are place names which might have given Wong’s landscapes distinct identity and history. Wong is equally leery and meagre in the use of town or city names. To be sure, urban spatial references abound in his work, but their contours are often blurred, the locales unnamed, so that they remain more symbolist imagery or psychological spaces reflecting the exilic state of mind. Yi-Fu Tuan’s differentiation between space and place is useful here. Space is just physical, concrete, while place is invested with attachments and meanings – it is experienced, lived and remembered space. In Ee’s and Lim’s poetry, space is remembered and transformed into place; in Wong

a sense of placelessness predominates, the perceived wilderness being inhospitable to Wong's poetic imagination. Malacca, which dominates Ee's and Lim's work, and which is also where Wong's Peranakan father was born, scarcely gets a mention in Wong's poems, and at best appears in abstract and vague images. Even a rare place-name poem like "Batu Lane, K.L.," from *How the Hills Are Distant*, is meagre in spatial specifications, and withholds sensory details so that the response to the environment is one of detachment and withdrawal:

... And suddenly the lane opens onto a settlement.  
till now I could not have guessed  
I would find myself wandering on a warm night  
among so many in this foetid maze of hovels,  
lost in a fog of moist intent  
caught from the musk and stale scent of women  
in closed rooms. I find myself among the dead  
who yet have not died to their hungers,  
returning to this ruined world in search  
of bodies, of unprotected human hosts.

(*An Acre of Day's Glass* 31)

The scene could be any slum in India, but for the place name. The atmosphere is purgatorial, wasteland-like, a limbo where the Dante-like poet is doomed to wander in exile. Even Singapore, which figures positively in Ee's and Lim's work, fails to conjure up any sense of excitement or change of Wong's spatial poetics. "Note Entry – Singapore, January 1962" marks a visit before the expulsion of Singapore from the Malaysian Federation three years later. The poem tracks a car travelling at "ninety, beetling into the obsessive shell/ of a parched landscape. And K.L. hours behind" (*An Acre of Day's Glass* 16). Unlike Ee, who often seeks to bridge the two countries in a peninsula transnational topo-poetics, tracing "the straight road from Tranquerah and Petaling Jeya to Singapore's "Duncarn Road to Tekkah" and "the plangent/ maze of Geylang Serai and Serangoon Road" (*Nearing the Horizon* 4), Wong does not arrive at any epiphanous vision of political coherence or geographical continuity between the two countries. Instead, he discerns only disunity and disconnection, the Malay and the Chinese communities separate from each other, the ostensible occasion for the trip to a garden party at the bishop's house ending in anti-climax, and a vision of doom:

Under the flare of the sun's declension,  
the hills ignited. We passed the region  
of the dead, the circular descent of those  
who died and had committed nothing.

Our room's on the second floor.  
I am rather tired after today;

I feel the darkness of Babylon at the door.  
*(Nearing the Horizon 17)*

Elsewhere, the city is a place of emptiness and absence. The wilderness image that clings to his visions of the countryside is matched by the wasteland motif that hangs over his urbanscapes: in “For a Local Osiris,” the desolation is stark: “The city, which whitens before mid-morning/ into the furnace of the overhanging sun/ is a place of your absence.” The same hallucinatory note is struck in “Against the Wilderness”: “The city, for you, reveals itself as desert./ Under a bright pall of heat that fires every street,/ you will pick your way in and out of the dreams of sleepers” (171). Neither country nor city offers any means of escape from that crippling sense of dislocation and alienation.

At the source of Wong’s acute sense of exile is the sense of not-being-at-home in the languages he is surrounded by: English, which is the erstwhile imperial language, foreign, inadequate and therefore inauthentic when applied to native experience; Malay, which is equally foreign to him and which is imposed on him because of the Malay cultural and political hegemony; and Chinese, which his forebears had lost in diaspora. Eddie Tay comments: “Wong’s exile is that of a cultural displacement, rather than that of a geographical dislocation” (“Unsettling Ways of Exile”). The poem “Elsewhere than Here” confirms this, tracing a longing to escape to an inner exile, a separation from a sustaining source:

For here, more than elsewhere,  
 we have let the common day flood out  
 the world with the darkness  
 of things and ourselves become  
 its depth, its centre,  
 pitch thick, impervious,  
 wholly removed from the true source of light.  
*(An Acre of Day’s Glass 81)*

This “true source” for Wong is his Chinese roots and cultural heritage, and his acute sense of exile discovers appeasement in the rediscovery of exemplary and tutelary poets of the Tang and Song dynasties. No doubt his route to the classical Chinese poets stems from his attempt to return to his roots, to reclaim his heritage. Of his translations of classical Chinese poets Tay sees them as a strategy of bringing his Chinese strand in him into conversation with other cultural elements, providing a means of “clarifying and affirming his identity as a Chinese Malaysian.” The act of translation yields a sense of homecoming for Wong, but it also gives Wong access to antecedent from his ancestral culture whose key themes were exile and home. The translations of Tao Yuanming, Li Bai and Du Fu provided exemplars and parallels to Wong’s exilic predicament and a context in which to situate his thoughts and

feelings about home and exile. Especially resonant is a sonnet sequence “Recalling Exile,” free interpretations of the poems the Song Dynasty poet Su Shi wrote when he was expelled to Huizhou, south of the Yangtze River. Su Shi’s expulsion, and that of many Tang and Song poets, to remote, “uncivilised” areas south of the Yangtze, is a form of internal exile, and perhaps speaks strongly to Wong’s situation. The location of Su Shi’s exile is coastal, echoing the recurrent topos in Wong’s exilic locus:

The sea comes in sullen and black, brimming over  
in a rising flood from the far end of the sky  
as I make my fearful crossing into a dawn  
still-birthered in faint smears of its own spilt light.

*(An Acre of Day’s Glass 262)*

Far from home and family, Su Shi ekes out a self-sufficient hermetic existence in a hovel, at the edge of “this wilderness of waters across the world’s edge” (*An Acre of Day’s Glass* 262). For the first time in Wong’s poetry, there is peace and contentment, as his surrogate self establishes a home away from home in exile. In the sonnet “Happiness” he reads “Du Fu and others” for company and solace, and forgets “the viper in contentious men at court.” In the closing lines there is a rare moment of joy: “Yet, as from embers of the stove I fan to brew weak tea/ for neighbours calling, I catch from the debris, a flame/ of happiness rising as we talk into a late noon rain” (*An Acre of Day’s Glass* 264). This sense of peace is enhanced and affirmed further in the sequence, in “So long in this wilderness ...”:

So long in this wilderness, I am now wholly  
constituted of its earth, its habitable air,  
and its waters raised by an unabated, tropic sun.  
My spirit has taken on the colour of its days,  
content it is not consumed in the hungers  
of unsatisfied flesh, diminished in pain or its sickness.  
No ruffians here break in to rouse me from my hovel  
of small dreams or cut me down into the mud  
where crows and egrets cry across a daylight marsh.  
At the time of year when hamlets rot in the air  
pregnant with impending early rains, or when dry winds  
crash like an incoming sea over ripening fields,  
I track with the folk through fields, where familiars snag our feet,  
bearing meat and wine for the far temple, its listening shrine.

*(An Acre of Day’s Glass 266)*

The poet has reached an accommodation with his state of exile. In fact, he has gone native, and has become a part of the community and is at home in the alien landscape. This is a rare moment of coherence and equilibrium in Wong's work, reflecting a shift in his exilic poetics; exile is no longer dislocating and crippling, it has become liberating and enabling, giving the requisite distance to resolve the issues of place and home.

In his seminal work on human geography, Yi-Fu Tuan states: "Yet it is possible to be fully aware of our attachment to place only when we have left it and can see it as a whole from a distance" (411). Physical exile and separation from the lost home and the past sharpened the sense of place in Ee's and Lim's work and drew the focus on an abiding image of Malacca contrapuntal to their place in exile. Ee's exilic pain and distance yield representations of a Malacca that are almost devoid of human presence, the mythologising impulse in an iconic poem like "Melaka" establishing the genius loci through historical allusions rather than intimate spatial or human details. No less hauntingly vacant are the glimpses of Lim's Malacca, albeit ghosted with familial memories. In both poets there is a detachment and distance in their mappings of their natal place; the autobiographical "I" and self-narrative are kept out of the spatial representations by the pain and loss of exile. In the trajectories of their lives and works, the unwavering sense of exile fosters a sense of place that is unstable and complex, generating spatial readings that are fraught, filled with loss, longing, anxiety and ambivalence. Wong's poetry inhabits an exilic state, locating his readings of place from the margins of exile that are no less troubled and unstable than Ee's and Lim's. Together, their readings of place form a psycho-geography that reflects the liminal and uncertain state of exile Anglophone Malaysian poetry inhabits in the 70s and 80s. In these three pioneering poets, a displaced consciousness generates an exilic poetics which in turn has created a poetry that wrestles with cogent issues of home and belonging, identity and place, issues at best accommodated but not fully resolved in the spatial mappings of their poems. It remains to see how the succeeding generations of Malaysian Anglophone poets deal with the legacy of this poetry of displacement and exile, or if they can discover ways of homecoming these three poets could only glimpse from an exilic distance.

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