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Migration, Displacement, and Movements in the Global Space: Ming-Yuen S. Ma's Multi-Media Project *Xin Lu: A Travelogue in Four Parts*

XIAOJING ZHOU

> America is founded on myths of mobility. . . . Yet the Asian American has been conspicuously absent in existing generalist formulations of a presumably universally applicable theory of American mobility. . . . What, in their works, are the spatial expressions of the Asian American's "place" in the overall social structure?
>
> ——Sau-ling Cynthia Wong[1]

> The spread of border-crossing Internet technology highlights the vexed positioning of Asian Americans vis-à-vis the U.S. nation-state and their uncertain relationship to the notion of diaspora.
>
> ——Rachel Lee and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong[2]

In her 2003 introduction with Rachel Lee to their co-edited critical anthology, *Asian America.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace*, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong draws critical attention to the implications of the formation of an Asian American "diasporic community" in cyberspace. "If *diasporic* community is not an oxymoron," propose Wong and Lee, "then we must consider how virtual media might be more seamlessly adopted by ethnically or racially defined communities whose geographical proximity

has not been (as) crucial to their sense of cohesion." While the status of "Asian America" is still in debate, they note, "Asian Americans—like Jews—have similar deterritorialized communal articulation that may lend itself to virtual mediation." When cyberspace is not confined by national borders or actual geographical locations such as one's dwelling, what new possibilities are opened up in "virtual mediation" in articulating Asian American identities, diasporas, and social positions in relation to the nation-state? Wong and Lee raise this question in their observation that "the spread of border-crossing Internet technology highlights the vexed positioning of Asian Americans vis-à-vis the US nation-state and their uncertain relationship to the notion of diaspora."[3]

This statement about the uncertain impact of a transnational cyberspace community on the positioning of Asian Americans in the US nation-state and their ambivalent relationship to the notion of diaspora, echoes Wong's concern about the viability of diasporic discourse which disengages with the power structure of the nation-state, as articulated in her essay, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads." In this essay, Wong argues for the necessity of "a nation" as a "political location" for Asian Americans' struggle to challenge and transform power relations structured by race. While recognizing the ways in which a diasporic perspective can enable a more inclusive Asian American cultural and political coalition, Wong emphasizes that "a denationalized Asian American cultural criticism may exacerbate liberal pluralism's already oppressive tendency to 'disembody,' leaving America's racialized power structure intact."[4] Thus, Wong's theoretical perspective on the significance of the hierarchies of race intersected by gender, class, and sexuality as a critical framework of Asian American cultural criticism cannot be equated with a "cultural nationalist" position or with privileging "US-centric narrations," which have been critiqued by scholars who call for a shift of critical attention "from the discourse of immigration to the discourse of diasporas."[5]

For Wong, Asian American narrations of immigration, migration, and diasporas are entangled, rather than mutually exclusive. This applies both to the United States as well as to virtual spaces where race still functions as an organizing principle for presentations of group identities and power relations.[6] Her examination of the mobility theme in Asian American writings situates Asian Americans' representations of movement within the US nation-space in the historical contexts of racial subjugation and exclusion, noting that contrary to mobility in mainstream discourses, which "regularly connotes independence, freedom, an opportunity for individual actualization and/or social renewal," mobility in Asian American works "is usually associated with subjugation, coercion, impossibility of fulfillment for self or community."[7] However, Wong also points out that "sustained attention to the mobility motif" in Chinese American writings such as *Homebase* by Shawn Wong reveals an underlying "America-claiming" theme which can also be found in "other Asian American mobility narratives."[8]

Given the new patterns of post-1965 immigration and migration, and the emergence of virtual space and multimedia technology, Asian Americans' representations of mobility associated with immigration, exile, dislocation, and diasporas are no longer primarily concerned with "claiming America." Nevertheless, mobility across national borders in the works of Chinese American artists such as Ming-Yuen S. Ma continues to engage with the Chinese and Chinese American experience within the racialized power structure of the United States and elsewhere. In fact, Ma's experimental videos about Chinese diasporas address Wong's concerns, and enact a viable "virtual mediation" that situates Chinese diasporas in the historical contexts of British colonialism and American racial exploitation and exclusion, while confronting other forms of oppressions, including sexism and heterosexism in both the East and West. By moving outside of the nation-state into the "global space," Ma's works mobilize a "virtual mediation" in representing Chinese diasporas and their social positioning, as well as their critical interventions within and outside the nation-state of their past and present countries. Hence, Ma exemplifies the possibilities of a historicized critical approach to the themes of diasporas and "claiming America" as embedded in Sau-ling Wong's writings on Asian American cultural criticism. Moreover, Ma insists on critiquing gendered and racialized power structures both within and outside the nation-state, while giving voice and visibility to the democratic struggles of racial and sexual minorities within and outside national borders and ethnic cultural boundaries.

The Politics of Invention in the "Global Space"

In an untitled epistolary essay addressed to Gina Marchetti, a leading scholar of film studies and the author of *From Tian'anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens, 1989–1997* (2006), Ming-Yuen S. Ma expresses his sense of being an outsider even in his relationship to Hong Kong (where he grew up). This feeling of estrangement, or rather, displacement, is a central element which Ma explores in his recent experimental videos. His investigation of various kinds of displacements has led to his most provocative and innovative representations of Chinese diasporas, as Ma turns his outsider's status into a critical position between the borders of nations. While the year 1997, which marks Hong Kong's return to China, is the end point of Marchetti's study of the ways in which China and the Chinese have been portrayed in cinema and media arts since the Tian'anmen revolt, 1997 is a starting point for Ma. That year Ma began his large-scale media project, *Xin Lu: A Travelogue in Four Parts,* which consists of four separate but thematically linked experimental videos subtitled, respectively: *Myth(s) of Creation* (1997), *Mother/Land* (2000), *Movements East—West* (2003), and *[os]* (2007). Using "personal and family history as a case study for the Chinese diasporic experience," Ma explores the ways in which identities of nation, culture, race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect and undermine one another beyond national borders.[9] In so doing, *Xin Lu* situates the

diaspora of the Hong Kong Chinese in a global context of postcolonial migrations and their subsequent disruptions of national and ethnic identities.

The title *Xin Lu*, according to Ma, alludes to the Chinese phrase *xin lu li cheng*, which literally reads "heart road experience journey." Hence, Xin Lu evokes the emotional, psychological journey along with actual, virtual, and conceptual travels between cities, countries, languages, images, voices, and narratives. Moreover, the pronunciation of "*xin*/heart" is a pun on "*xin*/new." *Xin Lu*, then, could also mean "new road/path," suggesting a new beginning for those who embark on a journey into the unknown, the unfamiliar world. By using the Chinese phrase for the title of the four-part travelogue, Ma at once affirms and destabilizes Chinese cultural and national identities. In Ma's travelogue, the movements outside of the geographical and cultural "'Chinese' territory" entail what Rey Chow calls "a self-conscious moving into the global space in which discursive plurality inevitably modifies and defines specific cultural identity rather than the other way around."[10] Therefore, the displacements in Ma's videos are much more than a function of the experience of dislocation or exile; they are displacements of established notions and boundaries of nation, culture, and ethnicity within and across national borders.

Ma enacts such multilayered displacements through innovative techniques and multimedia strategies, employing "discursive plurality" to undermine territorially bounded national and cultural identities, and to articulate hybrid communities and cultures. Hence the diasporic experience and perspectives in Ma's videos are similar to what Trinh T. Minh Ha calls "displacements that exceed mere strategies." As Trinh observes: "To listen, to see like a stranger in one's own land; to fare like a foreigner across one's own language; or, to maintain an intense rapport with the means and materiality of media languages is also to learn to let go of the (masterly) 'hold' as one unbuilds and builds."[11] With such simultaneous deconstruction and reinvention of identities, the experiential, conceptual, and technical displacements in Ma's experimental use of multimedia in *Xin Lu* also enact the kind of politics for which Elizabeth Grosz argues:

> Politics is an invention, a labor of fabrication, of experimentation with the unrepeatable and the singular, that links it more to intuition, to artistic production and aesthetic discernment than to planning, policy, or the extrapolation of existing relations. . . . The most radical and deeply directed projects of feminist, queer, antiracist, and postcolonial struggles involve a welcoming of the unsettling of previous categories, identities, and strategies, challenging the limits of present divisions and conjunctions, and revealing in the uncontainability and unpredictability of the future.[12]

It is precisely through such disturbances, challenges, and revelations that Ma renders the themes of migration, displacement, and movements in the global space particularly critical and incisive. The innovative technical experimentation of Ma's media art not only critiques territorially bounded and normalized identities of nation, culture, and ethnicity, but also reinvents new identities, new ways of being in the world as travelers, immigrants, foreigners, and outsiders. As a result, the homogeneous, hierarchical, binaried and dichotomized identities of the colonized and the colonizers, are destabilized and transformed. So too is naturalized knowledge about them.

Myth(s) of Creation (1997)

Ma challenges the genealogy of ethnicity and undermines the hegemony of dominant cultures by disrupting the Chinese and the Christian creation myths in Part One, *Myth(s) of Creation*. Visualizing the themes of travel, *Myth(s) of Creation* opens with full-screen images of intersected overpass bridges of expressway ramps, along with traffic noises and names of places in Europe, which are quickly replaced by the image of entangled plant roots, accompanied by the sound of water mingling with a female voice reading an Australian-Aboriginal creation myth borrowed from Bruce Chatwin's travelogue *The Songlines* (1987). This myth, which tells of the creation of the world and all beings through naming and singing by "the Ancients," serves as the central motif of the travelogue—a motif that simultaneously resonates with and counterpoises the themes and images of travels, migrations, and diasporas.

The motif of travel strategically mobilizes the actual and conceptual movement outside of the confines of the exiled dissenter's position into the kind of global space that Chow theorizes. In juxtaposition to the common origin of human beings and all living things as told in the Australian-Aboriginal myth of creation, images of diverse peoples and cultures appear with Ma's own voiceover narrating a journal entry about his family's holiday trip to England, the European mainland, and China, and about his family's dispersal over five years to different parts of the world in anticipation of the return of Hong Kong to China. This family vacation abroad and the family's eventual scattering to Australia, Canada, the United States, and England take on layered meanings when the family's travels coincides with the anniversary of the June 4th massacre at Tiananmen Square in 1989. While the reference to the massacre may explain, in part, the migration of Ma's family, the verbal and visual narratives about Ma's participation in the 1989 London march in support of the Pro-Democracy Movement in China indicate what is possible beyond national territories. Those who were marching in the streets of London are of different ethnic and national backgrounds—the marchers were holding signs and banners in English, Spanish, French, and Chinese. Thus, political alliances can be forged across ethnic and national boundaries, even if only temporarily, in protesting the tyranny of Chinese

autocratic state power and in support of the Chinese students' struggles for democracy.

However, the solidarity among people from different parts of the world in a democratic struggle does not erase the differences among them or those among nations. Nor does it eradicate the legacy of colonialism. Ma uses voiceover to remind viewers of Hong Kong's colonial history, articulating a sense of unease about the displacement of his family:

> In 1997, Hong Kong will revert to rule by Communist China. For more than a hundred years, Hong Kong had been a British colony. . . . I left H. K. in 1983, and now live in the United States. In four years' time, my mother will leave Hong Kong, her home for most of her life, and relocate to London. While we played tourists, these thoughts kept surfacing in my mind. Every little incident, a passing remark, the strangely familiar view of a foreign landscape, would trigger in me another consideration of our predicament.[13]

The possibility for Ma's family to vacation around the world and to relocate to countries in the "First World" is obviously a privilege; their displacement differs drastically from that of political exiles, war refugees, migrant workers, and working-class immigrants. However, Ma deals with the experiences of migration and displacement from several perspectives by interweaving multiple voices, disparate images, and various points of view into the travelogue. Subsequently Ma's family becomes only a fragment of the multitudinous peoples on the move across national borders. His narrative voice is among the many voices with varied accents and in different languages. In fact, the constant movements of bodies within and beyond national borders constitute a traversal through languages, destabilizing boundaries among nations, cultures, and communities. As a succession of place names such as "London," "Lyon," "Ardechelle Cheylard," "Mt. Gerbrier de Jonc," "Pont du Gard," "St. Jean du Gard, "Ales," "Paris," and "Venice" replace one another rapidly on the screen, the scenes of places, peoples, and persistent voices in the background produce an exciting and unsettling feeling of being in a foreign land among strangers. Echoing, yet not completely corresponding to, the contents of the voiceover, partial Chinese characters in a sign posted on the wall of an urban space appear briefly before giving way to spray-paint graffiti in an alphabetical language on the walls of abandoned houses, on the ground, and along the borders of a highway, which are replaced by sign language gestured by disembodied hands translated into English as "Traveler," "A Tourist," "An Exile," "A Nomad," "A Sojourner," "A Foreign Investor," and "An Illegal Alien." All of these different languages and names are set in motion along with the images of movement of people on foot or in vehicles. All the while, several voices are audible in the background, accompanying the images and the

different voiceovers reading citations from various texts on exile, immigration, and displacement.

The disjunctive images of places, peoples, and languages enhance the plurality and difference of perspectives and feelings asserted through the voiceovers reading a wide range of texts on diasporas. Isabelle Eberhardt's statement about her desire for freedom and excitement through a nomadic life is read in a female voice with a non-native English-speaker's strong accent.[14] The perspective of Eberhardt, a young Russian woman who lived among desert Arabs in North Africa, contrasts the sad feeling of homelessness conveyed in a quotation from Edward Said, read by a male speaker whose English has a different accent, which highlights the multiplicity of experience and context: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forcing between human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted."[15] Underlying the "rift" between "human being and a native place," however, new cultures, alternative communities, and unusual relationships to places emerge to unsettle national and cultural identities defined within national borders, as suggested by the collage of multiple different languages, geographies, and bodies in motion.

Ma captures not only the multiplicity and diversity but also the critical and political possibilities of representing diasporas by creating what might be called "direct time-image," which is detached from continuity of narrative or linear movement.[16] His interweaving of discontinuous events, narratives, voices, and sounds produces a unique cinematic capacity for capturing simultaneous durations of time, which Gilles Deleuze refers to in his discussion of cinema: "The relations and disjunctions between visual and sound, between what is seen and what is said, revitalize the problem and endow cinema with new powers for capturing time in the image." [17] Discontinuous and heterogeneous, time in Ma's travelogue is multidimensional. However, the resonant and disjunctive relations among images, words, voices, and sounds in Ma's video achieve much more than multi-dimensions (or a "forking") of time, in which "a coexistence of distinct durations, or of levels of duration; a single event can belong to several levels: the sheets of past coexist in a non-chronological order."[18] Rather than simply multi-layered durations of a single event, Ma captures the convergences and simultaneities of a large number of historical events in various geographical locations across several national borders, producing an irreducible plurality and difference out of which new cultural identities and critical perspectives emerge. Both the new and the critical largely result from narrative, visual, and spatial ruptures that make impossible any unity or homogeneity of national and cultural identities. As distinct voices are reading citations from writers such as Bruce Chatwin, Edward Said, Rey Chow, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Giles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, among others, diverse bodily and spatial images are set in constant motion, shifting from place to place through jump-cuts.

The refusal of the colonized people to be vanquished or absorbed by their colonizers, and immigrants' resistance to assimilation by a dominant culture, are two prominent themes embedded in the voiceover citations in Ma's travelogue. It is worth noting that resistance to assimilation simultaneously creates new, hybrid identities which cannot be equated with an ethnic or national origin. A quotation from "Natural Criminal," a bilingual poem by the acclaimed Chicano poet Francisco X. Alarcón is a salient example:

I am
a nomad
in a country
of settlers

a drop
of oil
in a glass
of water

. . .
I am
history's
fresh and
living wound

. . . . . [19]

A different kind of displacement—that of native peoples by colonizers—is evoked in this poem both by its content and languages, English and Spanish—the colonial masters' languages which the "nomad" has mastered, as the poem is written and read in both languages. The nomad's position is articulated in opposition to that of "settlers," while the nomad's condition is turned into political agency that intervenes in the erasure of colonial history. Moreover, this postcolonial subject's assertion of a nomadic identity constitutes more than resistance or critique: it articulates a new identity in the making, one that is deterritorialized and uncontainable, claiming no ethnic genealogy or national belonging.

Resonating with the nomad's resistance, but contrasting with the nomad's rootlessness, the following citation alludes to another historically specific Chinese migration and displacement, as well as the possibilities of reinventing cultural and national identities outside of "native" national territories:

> Excellent in adaptation, we localize ourselves but do not assimilate. We remain always our own communities, and rebuild miniaturized versions of China in different periods

> of its history with which that particular community identifies. In these cities within cities, time could be stopped, compressed, retraced, and anticipated. . . . The different idealized versions of the Motherland include all the various guises and incarnations she has ever adopted—a reenactment of her history spread out in space.[20]

In the context of racism against Chinese and other Asian immigrants in European and North American countries, this statement about Chinatowns as "different idealized versions of the Motherland" highlights Chinese immigrants' resistance to assimilation, and foregrounds indirectly their spatially reinforced social and cultural marginalization, rather than suggesting a stable, uniform sentiment about a homogenous China. In fact, an inevitable multiplicity and diversity of "Chinas" are imbedded in the different ways in which Chinatown communities rebuild "miniaturized versions of China in different periods of its history."

Given the contingent conditions for such plural, variegated identifications with China, the reinvention of Chinese identities is an open-ended, unpredictable process of transformation. What is certain is the impossibility of tracing a single genealogy of the dissemination of Chinese national and cultural identities to a stable, singular "motherland." The impossibility of returning "home," or claiming a "home-country," and the emergence of hybrid cultures and communities are the tenor of *Myth(s) of Creation*, which is echoed in one of the closing citations: "This movement of the original is wandering, an *errance*, a kind of permanent exile if you wish, but it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland, nothing from which one has been exiled."[21] By suggesting that there is "no homeland from which one has been exiled," Ma radically undermines territorially bounded national and ethnic identities which are naturalized through the rhetoric of the "motherland."

Mother/Land

The concept of motherland and territorially bounded identities are called into question in Part Two, *Mother/Land*. Ma evokes and unhinges the link between "mother" and "land" by undermining the gendered and territorialized concept of national and ethnic identities from the subject position of the nomad. What is most provocative about Ma's denaturalization of national and ethnic identities is its subversion of the normalized link between birth, land, and nation—a link that underlies nativist racism and racist nationalism. The breaking of this link disrupts the apparently "natural" connection between "blood and soil" embedded in "motherland," thus unsettling the mythologized genealogy of "the people of the land" in the foundational narrative of the nation-state.[22]

Given the gendered concept of "motherland," Ma's exploration of its etymological and metaphorical meanings simultaneously unsettles multiple

naturalized identities—gender, nation, and ethnicity—through the innovative deployment of multi-media. While continuing to employ similar strategies of jump cut, inter-cut, and disjunctive juxtapositions of voice-over narratives, subtitles, soundtracks, performances, and visual images, he relies more heavily than he does in *Myth(s) of Creation* on autobiographical materials, particularly home movies, letters, and Ma's interviews with his mother. In an essay entitled "A Letter to Glauber Rocha," Ma states that "*Mother/Land* (2000) is an experimental video that uses my mother's migration in 1995 from Hong Kong to London as a starting point to create a meditation on the separations and departures that have shaped my identity and family history, the city of Hong Kong where I grew up, and the larger Chinese Diaspora."[23] By engaging with the larger Chinese Diaspora, Ma's investigation of identity formation leads to an exploration of a wider range of identities, including gender and sexuality regulated by the unity of the heterosexual family. The prominent presence of the mother in the video at once reiterates and subverts motherhood, womanhood, and motherland as constructed in patriarchal discourses.

Mother/Land begins with images of landscape—a recurrent metaphor of national identity. The camera moves from close-ups of water, to panoramic views of mountains, then to a shot of Ma's mother and Ma himself when he is four or five years old, with mountain ranges, a river, and a valley in the background. No sooner is the tie between mother/land and ethnic/national affiliation evoked through the visual images than is it contested by the sound effect—the whistling of the national anthem of the United States—and by a shot of Ma's mother in old age, walking in Kensington Park, London, with young Caucasian men walking behind her. This shot contrasts with the preceding visual metaphor of territorially bounded national identity (the mother-son image and the sublime landscape), disrupting the unity among birth, land, and nation, while destabilizing the politicized link between gendered body and space, both of which serve as a stable site for the construction of national identity.

While the footage from the home videos shows the mother in her conventional role in various settings, her gender identity is undercut by her own words and through inter-cuts which introduce a visual narrative of an alternative model of family. In her interview with Ma, the mother reveals her homosexual relationship with another woman, Hin Cheung, who was largely the reason for her choice to live in London: "We used to come here all the time, and Hin Cheung has lived here for several summers. Honestly, we moved here partly for her benefit—of all the countries we can move to, she likes England best." The "we" here does not include Ma's father, who chooses to stay in Hong Kong. The fact that the mother shows no intention to hide her same-sex-partner relationship, and that neither she nor Ma makes this relationship "exceptional," both undermine heterosexuality as the privileged norm.[24]

This subversive effect is enhanced by the interplay of two counter discourses—the classical official Chinese text on proper womanhood, *Lieh Nu Chuan*

(*Book of the Virtuous Woman*) and a visual narrative of an interracial lesbian couple with a child, posing for a family portrait in a studio. The Chinese text prescribes the rules of conduct, attire, and bodily care for women to follow, thus establishing the female body as the disciplined moral body subordinate to the patriarchy, whose structure of male domination is reflected in the privileging of the father-son relationship in the heterosexual unity of the traditional family. On the other hand, Ma's father is almost completely absent from his home movies—he is referred to peripherally, and his presence is only visible as an actual and metaphorical shadow in Ma's childhood scenes.[25] Moreover, the images of the interracial lesbian couple with a child function as a subtext that not only challenges the birth-land-nation link by "queering" motherhood, but also offers an alternative model of family made possible by diasporas. Their posing for a family portrait in the studio—the place for conventional family portraits—just as any family might do, adds to the effect of their subversion of the family norm. The black and Caucasian same-sex couple and their black, or possibly biracial, child evoke multiple diasporas in the world, and further disrupt the logic of nationalism predicated on territorially bounded racial and ethnic identities.

However, Ma makes clear that homosexuality is not accepted on equal terms with heterosexuality in the United States through one of his mother's letters read in English voiceover. In the letter, his mother expresses concern for the challenges Ma faces as a gay man living in the US: "Your sexual identity excludes you from many jobs. . . . I suppose you are not keeping your sexuality a secret, but your time being a political activist did not help." Nevertheless, the visibility of same-sex parents and of a multi-racial family in *Mother/Land* more than resists gendered, naturalized constructions of territorial national identity: its alternative family unit suggests other possibilities of identity formation and transformation outside established boundaries of nation, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

The multimedia and plural discourses which Ma employs enable him to engage with the complex and historically contingent meanings of motherland. Hence, despite its unhinging of national identities from national territories, *Mother/Land* does not dismiss Chinese emigrants' emotional attachment to China or Hong Kong. Nor does it downplay the importance of nationalist resistance to imperialist invasion and colonial subjugation. The complexity of Hong Kong Chinese population's feelings about Hong Kong and China is implied in his mother's story, told in her interview about her family's return to China during WWII when Japan invaded Hong Kong: "I was born in Hong Kong. During World War II, we did not want to stay in Japanese occupied territories. So we fled to Mainland China. . . . We lived there until the end of the war." Given Hong Kong's status as a British Crown Colony, the family's act asserts national affiliation with China as a form of resistance to Japanese invasion, calling critical attention to the complex historical conditions of geopolitics—Communism in China, British colonial rule in Hong Kong, and Japanese fascism and imperialism—under which Hong Kong Chinese negotiate their survival and resistance.

Ma spotlights the colonial status of Hong Kong and its separate identity from China by inserting shots of bauhinia flowers, Hong Kong's emblem, into the video in various places. When bauhinia appear with scenes from Hong Kong on the screen, they are accompanied by the whistling of the British national anthem. The fact that the mother speaks English with a British accent further enhances the effect of colonialism. To highlight this effect, Ma incorporates voiceover quotations from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, which protest Japanese colonial subjugation of Koreans through the imposition of the Japanese language: "Mother, . . . you speak the tongue the mandatory language like the others. It is not your own. . . . The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue."[26] Yet, the mother in Ma's video speaks Cantonese with him on the road in the UK. This fact suggests that his mother resisted British colonial subjugation by maintaining her ethnic identity through her "mother tongue" even after she left Hong Kong to live in London.

The actual and metaphorical severance of "mother" from "land" resulting from the mother's relocation to England not only transforms the mother's Chinese national and ethnic identities, but also unsettles the racially homogeneous national identity of England, her current home. A mutually transformative relationship is also implied in Ma's references to the national identity of the United States and other immigrants like himself. Ma foregrounds the unhinging of "mother" from "land" and its subsequent effects through visual and auditory strategies of displacement. He employs inter-cuts of audio fragments from the American, British and Chinese national anthems which do not always correspond to the national geographies, dislocating the national identities of all three nations. *Mother/Land* ends with a series of brief shots and audio cuts which highlight deterritorialized national and ethnic identities: bauhinia on Ma's street in Los Angeles and the whistling of US anthem; Mother walking away from the camera in Kensington Park, London; and credits along with the whistling of Chinese national anthem. These displacements evoke larger diasporas and their attendant political implications.

Global migrations of refugees, immigrants, and exiles challenge the genealogy of nations and ethnicities not only of those who have left their "motherlands," but also those of their host countries. While the hybridization of national and cultural identities resulting from postwar, postcolonial, and "postmodern" migrations of peoples is enacted in *Myth(s) of Creation*, the spatial and ideological unsettling of the birth/mother-land/national unity in *Mother/Land* leads to an alternative, radically destabilized space and its relation to time and history in Part III, *Movements East—West* (2003).

Movements East—West

In this episode, a new spatial and temporal relationship emerges with Ma's experimental techniques dealing with multiple and multi-layered histories, all of which are set in motion between the East and the West. Unlike the other parts of

Ma's travelogue, *Movements East—West* "is composed almost entirely from dissolves," in which "my personal and family history mingle and intersect seamlessly with wars and global social movements. When the images flow, time, space, and history are merged in the audio and visual layering. When the freeze frames occur, the cultural and historical specificity of these images reassert themselves."[27] Such a multi-layered collage-like montage representation of histories on a global scale is made possible in part through ruptures in the universal, totalizing concept of time from which world history and histories of the East and the West have been written. Along with these ruptures, the hierarchy of Eastern and Western nations is dismantled. So too are the dichotomies between the East and the West, whose polarized identities were locked into binaries such as backwardness versus progress, enlightenment versus ignorance, and tyranny versus democracy as constructed through the totality of universal time, and from the point of view of the dominant power.

National histories, particularly histories of social movements against domination and oppression, in *Movements East—West* are at once fragmented and connected to one another beyond regions and nations. As geography becomes a principle for locating and representing histories, Ma's use of a linear time-line from January 26, 1841 to September 11, 2001 paradoxically disrupts the linearity of time through juxtapositions and simultaneities of events in different places. These historical events subsequently take on a resonant significance in global contexts.

Movements East—West begins with a quotation from Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* to evoke the motif of travel, and to expand the themes of travel and Chinese diaspora to the history of imperial and colonial conquests and their consequences. The historical footage begins with Possession Point Harbor on Hong Kong Island, where the British flag was raised on January 26, 1841, marking the beginning of British colonial rule in Hong Kong, one of the aftermaths of the Opium War (1839–1842). Rather than offering any commentaries through written texts or voiceovers, Ma relies on evocations, resonances, and references produced by ensembles of superimposed images and subtitles. Take for example the series of nineteenth century events as indicated by the subtitles

January 26, 1841, Hong Kong
August 29, 1842, Nanking, China
June 26, 1843, Hong Kong
1851–1864, [Guandong] Province, China
January 19, 1861, Kowloon, HK
September 22, 1862, Washington DC,
June 24, 1867, The Sierra Nevada Mountains, USA
May 6, 1882, Washington, DC, USA
June 4, 1885, Rock Springs, WY, USA

Arranged in this sequence and identified with particular locations, the events are brought into proximity and their connections are interwoven. The historical context for and the impact of British imperialist domination and colonial subjugation of China are implied in the first five subtitles respectively—the British flag was raised on Hong Kong Island on January 26, 1841; China and Great Britain signed the Treaty of Nanking on August 29, 1842; Hong Kong was proclaimed a British Crown Colony on June 26, 1843; the Taiping Rebellion, one of the consequences of the Opium War, lasted from 1851 to 1864; and Kowloon Island was officially incorporated into the Hong Kong colony on January 19, 1861. Despite their geographical specificities, those historical events and their impact are not confined to mainland China or to Hong Kong. The social movements and civil wars in China following the end of the Opium War, such as the rebellion of Taiping Tianguo (Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace, 1851–1864), are implicitly linked to the US Civil War and to Chinese immigrants' experiences in the US.

Ma allows a single historic event in one location to suggest multiple associations with social movements that occurred within and outside of national borders, and during different historical periods. He achieves this effect through compression of space and time, which is reinforced through documentary footage along with subtitles. For instance, placed between the British imperialist impositions in China and the experience of Chinese immigrants in the United States, the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln on September 22, 1862 evokes global transportation and migration of labor, whose significance is embedded in this chain of events and their implied associations. Following the abolition of slavery, Chinese labor was aggressively sought to replace slave labor in South America and in southern United States. Chinese labor was also in great demand on the US west coast soon after the Civil War. The Treaty of Nanjing legalized the "coolie" trade and enabled the British to control Chinese ports, and hence the transportation of "coolies" to the Americas. The American demand for labor also coincided with Chinese immigration to the United States largely as a result of social chaos in China following the Opium War, and partly because of the Gold Rush.[28]

Ma's selection and organization of footage, dates, and places highlight both the subjugation and resistance of the Chinese among other oppressed peoples. The proximity of subtitles such as "June 24, 1867, The Sierra Nevada Mountains, USA" and "May 6, 1882, Washington, DC, USA" insists on documenting the strike by Chinese workers building the transcontinental railroad, and making visible institutionalized racism against Chinese immigrants through the Chinese Exclusion Act, a United States federal law passed on May 6, 1882 which excluded Chinese workers from immigration to the US for ten years, and barred Chinese immigrants from US citizenship.[29] By alluding to pivotal historical moments, Ma situates the Chinese experience of subjugation and resistance at home and abroad in a global context of colonialism and racism, and contextualizes his own experience in multiple histories, including Chinese American history.

Moreover, Ma foregrounds the relations between economic interests and racism by shifting the geographical locations of the footage, while showing the subtitles in chronological order. Brought into proximity in the virtual global space of the screen, the reference to slavery in the US sheds light on the racist laws against the Chinese and on racialized class conflict as manifested in the violent attacks on Chinese immigrants by white miners and other working-class whites in the US during the nineteenth century. The 1885 Rock Springs Massacre, as suggested by the subtitle, "June 4, 1885, Rock Springs, WY, USA," is a salient example.[30] Shortly after the completion of the transcontinental railroad which depended heavily on Chinese labor, violent anti-Chinese riots broke out in the American West, including the Rock Springs Massacre on September 2, 1885 when "armed white men attacked their [Chinese] coworkers, killing 28, wounding fifteen, and driving the rest out town."[31]

It is worth noting that Ma uses the date "June 4" rather than "September 2" for the 1885 riots in Rock Springs, which creates a resonance with the June 4, 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square. In fact, he collapses time and space by superimposing the subtitle "June 4, 1885, Rock Springs, WY, USA" over the footage of a 1990 protest march in memory of the democracy movement in China and the massacre on June 4, 1989 on Tiananmen Square. The prominent Chinese characters "Do Not Forget" on one of the marcher's banners allude to both massacres despite their vastly different historical circumstances and consequences. Ma achieves such poignant focus and global scope in his investigation of social questions through technical "displacements that exceed mere displacing strategies," to borrow again Trinh T. Minh Ha's phrase.[32]

As layered footage of the aforementioned historical events superimpose on and dissolve into one another, and as one subtitle appears briefly and gives way to the next, the image of railroad tracks remains relatively stable with cars moving across the tracks in both directions, east and west. In addition to evoking the Chinese railroad workers' strike in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the railroad tracks and the moving cars also activate the double meanings embedded in the title of Part Three—travels between the East and the West, and their subsequent, interrelated social movements in both the East and the West.

As the large Chinese characters for "Do Not Forget" suggest, Ma's strategic use of dates and place names in the subtitles without identifying their historical events have the effect of countering historical amnesia. The evocative images along with specific dates and places compel viewers to investigate possible connections and historical significance, thus participating in the constructing of histories, while conveying their relations and implications. A major theme emerges out of the documentary footage and timeline of the twentieth century and resonates with events from the nineteenth century: social movements and changes grow out of resistance to subjugation and oppression. At the same time, these historical events also suggest multiple connections between social upheavals and global migrations of people. Provocatively, Ma begins representation of the twentieth century with

"January 21, 1910," the official opening date of the immigration station on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. The station "was used as the immigration detention headquarters for Chinese awaiting jurisdiction on the outcomes of medical examinations and immigration papers. It was also the holding ground for deportees awaiting transportation back to the motherland."[33] Apart from echoing the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882 and repealed in 1943, the evocation of US national border control and exclusion of particular groups of people on the basis of race and country of origin at the beginning of the twentieth century becomes especially poignant when indirectly associated with the aftermath of "September 11, 2001, New York City, NY, USA." Placed at the end of the timeline that begins with January 26, 1841, the British colonization of Hong Kong, "September 11, 2001, New York City, NY, USA" is implicated in the historical continuum of colonialism and imperialism, and their unexpected and often uncontainable consequences.

Ma renders a global, multi-dimensional perspective on apparently local or national historical events through *Movements East—West.* Through this episode, Ma consciously moves into the global space, as the "nomad" or "outsider" of any nation state. The position of the nomad, then, can be politically subversive and creatively productive when the outsider re-represents and re-interprets national histories from in-between the borders of nations. However, the feelings of loss, nostalgia, and displacement which accompany the experience of being an outsider in one's home country cannot be erased by the critical and creative possibilities of the nomad.

[os]

In counterpoint to the motif of departures from home in *Myth(s) of Creation* and *Mother/Land,* Part Four, *[os]*, enacts a return to Hong Kong/home through nostalgic memories, which indicate the impossibility of real return. This paradox is embedded in both the title *[os]* and in its narrative structure, which interweaves ten individual stories about childhood in Hong Kong with nine interrupted sequences of ghost hunting in the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel in Los Angeles. According to Ma, *[os]* "represents the etymological Œghost that haunts the creation of the word Œnostalgia, which combines the Greek word *nostos* (return home) and New Latin *algia* (akin to the Greek word *neisthai,* to return)."[34] While the stories of growing up in Hong Kong told by several emigrants enact a virtual return to childhood in one's "homeland," the impossibility of returning to Hong Kong is implied by the act of ghost hunting performed by the producers of *[os]*—Ma and Lisa Asagi. Like a ghost, the past haunts the present, remaining ubiquitous yet elusive, much like the historical bones this work attempts to exhume (*os* is also the French word for bone).

Moreover, the virtual return to Hong Kong through individual memories and story-telling entails narratives of homosexuality, which is alluded to in the first three parts of *Xin Lu*, hence making "queerness" part of the plurality of global critical discourses. Ma strategically undermines heterosexuality as the privileged norm by

allowing gay men to recount their childhood experiences of homoerotic attraction. No less important is the fact that these stories do not articulate any Chinese nationalism or regionalism despite their emotional attachment to Hong Kong. The result is a new identity affiliation emerging from gay-and-lesbian struggles and political activism, as indicated by Ma's collaboration with Lisa Asagi—a political and creative collaboration that transcends ethnically defined identity boundaries.

In queering the diasporas, particularly the Chinese diaspora, and inventing new hybrid identities, Ma resists the confinement of both territorial nationalism and the kind of "transnational republic" which Aihwa Ong investigates.[35] Ong notes that Chinese diaspora can become an extension of the motherland: "The 'global Chinese' Internet public sees itself as an extension of the homeland. On its web pages, members articulate a spurious connection between the digital-driven diaspora and earlier waves of Chinese patriots who possessed the conviction that the experience and status of 'Chinese abroad' was directly proportional to the status of China in the international system." However, Ong adds,

> Today's Chinese diaspora intellectuals and elites appear to be speaking out of sync with this particular nationalist struggle. Those who *view* themselves as an extension of territorial nationalism are primarily new migrants from the Chinese mainland whom the Chinese government calls *haiwai huaren* ("Chinese abroad"). They may be living and working in the United States, but their hearts and politics are tied to the interests of the Chinese nation. One can say that there is one transnational public that takes mainland China as its frame of reference, a second transnational public which is an extension of Taiwanese nationalism, and a third network of emigrants from Hong Kong. These different publics may overlap at the margins, but their orientations are toward politics and social relations with the home country.[36]

Ma modifies this conviction by broadening and destabilizing international systems such as colonialism and imperialism which shape both the status of China and that of the "Chinese abroad." The Chinese emigrants' emotional attachment to Hong Kong in *[os]* asserts no nationalist sentiments, nor nationalist politics. Rather, the politics of *[os]* resides in its queer identity affiliations, which are uncontainable within national boundaries.

Coda

Neither mainland China nor Hong Kong functions as the central frame of reference in Ma's *Xin Lu: A Travelogue in Four Parts*. The departure of Ma's works from a particular

national framework into an existential, discursive, and even virtual global space cannot be understood simply as an intellectual exercise, or dismissed as an elitist, privileged gesture of hybrid identity politics. As *Movements East—West* indicates, both China and Hong Kong are implicated in the transnational ideologies and practices of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism as well as in the racialized power structure of the US nation-state. Moreover, the status of the Chinese at home and abroad is shaped by both national and orderless operations of power, including those of domination and resistance. From this perspective, the nationalist struggle of the Chinese for esteemed status in the international system has to contest transnational ideologies and practices that violate human rights and social justice. Ma's videos about migration, displacement, and movements in the global space offer a necessary intervention in nationalist struggles within and beyond national territories. By situating Chinese diasporas in the contexts of specific national histories and the histories of colonial and imperial empires, Ma's videos counter the myths of mobility in American culture and literature in terms of unlimited freedom, opportunities, expansion, and conquest. Rather than postulating "denationalization," or de-historicizing the experience of Chinese diasporas and Chinese Americans, the movement of border crossings in Ma's work situate the oppressions, exclusions, and resistance of the Chinese and of Chinese Americans in larger historical contexts. In fact, embedded in the virtual and actual "global space" of Ma's videos is the emergence of new "political coalitions *across* national boundaries," which, as Sau-Ling C. Wong suggests, will form the core of "diaspora studies," providing individuals with "the opportunity to build."[37]

The global space in Ma's experimental media project is more than a space of discursive plurality or cultural hybridity. It is a space for exploring political and artistic alternatives, a space for intervention and invention. "[F]or the creating of the new can come about only through a dislocation of and disassociation with the present rather than simply its critique," as Grosz contends in her discussion of the politics of invention.[38] *Xin Lu: A Travelogue in Four Parts* presents contemporary Chinese diasporic experience in precisely these terms. Its conceptual and technical displacements allow the present to be ruptured by the past, while affirming new identities and new ways of being "strangers" in the world as a "foreign land." In so doing, it offers a viable form of "virtual mediation" in critiquing and reinventing Chinese diasporic and Chinese American identities within and across national borders.

Notes

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[1] Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 118 –119, 121.

[2] Rachel Lee and Sau-ling C. Wong, Introduction, *Asian America.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace* (New York: Routlege, 2003), xix.

[3] Ibid., xix.

[4] Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads." *Amerasia Journal* 21.1/2 (1995): 18–19.

[5] Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, "Immigration and Diaspora" in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 297. See also N.V.M. Gonzalez and Oscar V. Campomanes, "Filipino American Literature" in the same anthology, 62–124.

[6] See Lee and Wong, Introduction, xiii–xxv.

[7] Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*, 121.

[8] Ibid. 142.

[9] Ming-Yuen S. Ma's unpublished manuscript, "Untitled (Dear Gina)," April 6, 2005.

[10] Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 95.

[11] Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 199.

[12] Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 260–261.

[13] Ma, *Myth(s) of Creation*.

[14] Annette Kobak, *Isabelle: The Life of Isabelle Eberhardt* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

[15] Edward Said, "Reflections upon Exile," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (New York: New Museum/MIT Press, 1990), 357.

[16] Gilles Deleuze, Preface to the English Edition, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xi.

[17] Ibid. xiii.

[18] Ibid. xii.

[19] Francisco X. Alarcón, "Natural Criminal," in *From the Other Side of Night/ Del Otro Lado de la Noche*, trans. Francisco X. Aragón (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 38.

[20] This citation is written by Ma himself. It is read as one of the voiceovers in *Myth(s) of Creation*.

[21] Paul De Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 92.

[22] I borrowed the phrase "blood and soil" from Alfred Rosenberg's book in which he constructs an essential "Germanness"—a racialized national and cultural identity—through a naturalizing link between "blut and ehre": "The National Socialist vision of the world," he writes, "springs from the conviction that soil and blood constitute what is essential about Germanness, and that it is therefore in reference to these two givens that a cultural and state politics must be directed." See Alfred Rosenberg, *Blut and Ehre, Ein Kampf fü deutsche Wiedergeburt. Reden und Aufsätze 1919–1933* (Munich: F. Eher nachf., 1936), 242. The quotation in English is from Giorgio Agmben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Helloer-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 129.

[23] Ma, "A Letter to Glauber Rocha," *Release Print: The Magazine of Film Arts Foundation*, November/December, 2005, 40.

[24] Ma has been actively involved in gay and lesbian community activism in the United States, and within Asian Pacific American communities. Some of his media art and critical writing engage with the intersections of heterosexism and racism, as well as AIDS and queer aesthetics. See for example, Alice Y. Hom and Ming-Yuen S. Ma, "Premature Gestures: A Speculative Dialogue on Asian Pacific Islander Lesbian and Gay Writing," in *Critical Essays: Gay and Lesbian Writers of Color*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (New York: Haworth Press, c1993), 21–51.

[25] For a provocative discussion of a particular group of Chinese feminists and their theories, see Tani E. Barlow, "Woman at the Close of the Maoist Era in the Polemics of Li Xiaojiang and Her Associates," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 506–543.

[26] Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (New York: Tanam Press, 1982), 45.

[27] Ma, "A Letter to Glauber Rocha," 40.

[28] Madeline Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882 –1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[29] The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was renewed in 1892 by the Geary Act for another 10 years, and again in 1902 with no terminal date. It was not repealed until 1943 by the Magnuson Act, allowing a national quota of 105 Chinese immigrants per year. Large scale Chinese immigration to the United States occurs only after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. The 1952 McCarren-Walter Act finally removed all racial prerequisites for US citizenship, thereby allowing Asian immigrants to be naturalized. See

Hyung-Chan Kim, ed. *Asian Americans and Congress: A Documentary History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

[30] The Rock Springs Massacre in Wyoming was part of the anti-Chinese movement which became violent and widespread over the west coast with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.

[31] Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home,* 59.

[32] Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, 199.

[33] Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, "Introduction," *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910 –1940* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1993), 8.

[34] Ming-Yuen S. Ma's email to the author, December 4, 2006.

[35] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Pres, 2006), 63.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered," 18.

[38] Grosz, *The Nick of Time*, 261.