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**Analyzing the Significance of Home in
Li-Young Lee's Poetry**

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ABSTRACT

This Bachelor's Thesis considers Li-Young Lee's work from a spatial perspective, by analysing the role of the house in the interpretation and representation of his identity as an Asian-American author throughout his poems. In its theoretical approach this study takes into consideration previous research conducted on Lee and the nature of space for Asian-American authors, as well as works by seminal authors on the field of space analysis and space poetics such as Michael Foucault and Gaston Bachelard, respectively. Ultimately, the study aims to provide a novel and more nuanced perspective on Li-Young Lee's work by discussing the significance of this recurring poetic device throughout his literary career.

Keywords: Li-Young Lee, Asian-American Poetry, Identity, Belonging, Home, Space.

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado considera la obra de Li-Young Lee desde una perspectiva espacial, analizando el papel del hogar en la interpretación y la representación de su identidad como autor asiático-americano en sus poemas. En su aproximación teórica, este estudio parte de las investigaciones previas sobre Lee y lo que el espacio significa para los autores asiático-americanos. También incluye obras de autores fundamentales en el campo del análisis del espacio y la poética del espacio como son Michael Foucault y Gaston Bachelard, respectivamente. En última instancia, al tratar la relevancia de este recurso poético a lo largo de su carrera literaria, este estudio ofrece una perspectiva novedosa y detallada sobre la obra de Li-Young Lee.

Palabras clave: Li-Young Lee, Poesía asiático-americana, Identidad, Pertenencia, Hogar, Espacio.

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“There exists no more compact image of intimacy, none that is more sure of its center, than a flower’s dream of the future while it is still enclosed, tightly folded, inside its seed.”

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

“Reading first the odd-numbered pages, and then the even, he read out loud, while all one hundred rooms of the house of the seed echoed with the sound of a hand reading.”

Li-Young Lee, *The Winged Seed*

Introduction

Home is a liminal concept. It manages to blur the boundaries that, at first glance, seem to separate the psychological world from physical experience, bringing place and feeling together into a symbiotic communion central to the human experience. It equals belonging, that hard-sought destination for those who feel rootless, and a resting place for the ones who have found their place in the world, or never left it. Paradoxically, it can also signify both. This search for meaning has proven fruitful as a theme for countless writers writing in the English language, especially for ethnic authors whose cultural and filial roots, so distinct from their surrounding social context, lay in faraway countries. The writings of Li-Young Lee, an Indonesian-born Asian American writer, belong to such a group. In many of his poems, themes of memory, fatherhood, identity, or belonging, among others, permeate houses, ooze out of study-rooms and windows, and resonate among walls, his poems featuring a clear domo-centric perspective. This work aims to explore this prominent dimension of Lee’s poems, his “house of memory” which spans all his five volumes of poetry, from *Rose* to *The Undressing*, as well as his poetic memoir, *The Winged Seed*.

In many of the selected poems, such as in *Rose*’s “Early in the Morning” ‘home’ becomes the stage that guards intimate experience, reaching its maximum prominence in Lee’s third volume of poetry, *Book of my Nights*, where the house dominates as the preferred point of view of the poet, his center. As Lee ages, his style gradually evolves, and so does the poetic function of the house: it slowly shifts from a rather passive locale, the backstage yet the center of the poem, to an environment surrounding and guarding the

poet. In his most recent poems, those belonging to *The Undressing*, the more mature poet finds solace in the intimacy of his home, in his wife, in his children, and in the memories they all evoke. In *The Winged Seed*, much like in his poetry volumes, Lee employs images rooted in memory and experience. Here, however, the autobiographical intent is clearer, and the text is embellished by a poetic and playful prose style. This work stands in fact as the most direct path to accessing his ethnic roots, and how they have shaped him and his work.

This paper will begin the exploration of Lee's poetic house by considering the dual nature of the term 'home' as pertaining to the realms of the physical and the oneiric or psychological. The ambiguity this generates makes defining the term a difficult task, one that places space at stake. The discussion will then turn towards the dimensionality of the house as part of the wider field of space poetics as well as to the exploration of its presence in the works of other Asian American writers. The analysis of Lee's poems will not only cover the house as a whole but will also turn to its interior, exploring its more intimate localities: the rooms and halls at its different floors. This is important to consider because, in many of these poems, it is from and through these rooms that the poet positions his perspective, many times looking out of a window, at other times even venturing into other 'houses', other spaces, most prominently that of his father.

The objects that populate the house constitute its final and most intimate 'layer'. Attention to detail is one of the core features of Lee's poetry, where mundane, everyday things evoke transcendental memories. In several poems such as "From Blossoms" or "Persimmons" small objects acquire an unexpectedly greater significance. It seems only logical, then, to expect homely objects to bear a similar weight. Those that lie beyond the house are relevant as well. The analysis will finish by commenting the way in which the poet accesses the outside of the house, from the point of view of the window as well as by entering other 'homes', mainly that of his father. These views and locations also contribute to building his idea of a house.

The way the house, rooms and windows are employed in Lee's poems varies from book to book. As such, the order of composition of the volumes will be taken into account in order to assess any possible evolution of their use as part of literary devices, images, or regarding any other characteristic relevant to the analysis.

Bachelard's seminal work on the philosophy of space, *The Poetics of Space*, together with –and challenged by– ongoing discussions on Asian-American and ethnic writing constitute the theoretical basis of this paper, complemented by various other works on the nature of space. Ultimately, what follows attempts to modestly contribute to the field of ethnic studies by offering a new perspective on the work of such an important author as Li-Young Lee.

Literature Review

Although research on Lee's work is, unfortunately, rather scarce, his belonging to the relatively young Asian-American literary tradition is uncontested, even if the nature of this group of writers, much like the themes discussed in their works, has been a source of debate following its devising (Lim, 51). Despite himself refraining from being assigned that label (Rees, 2001), most of the literature on Lee focuses on discussing his experience and background as a migrant, which shares many characteristics with fellow writers Ocean Vuong or Maxine Kingston.

Indeed, individuals belonging to the Chinese diaspora group challenge the traditional notion of ascribing to a single cultural denomination, creating in the process a new sense of identity, characterized by the notion of what Zhang calls “nonlimited locality” (134). This delocalized, intermingling mixture of spaces could be thought of as a “heterotopia”, a concept devised by Michael Foucault that lies in contrast to the utopia and that attempts to group together entities and concepts so different from one another they would otherwise be unreconcilable (Vidler, 69). The nature of Asian-American writing, much like its authors, lies at the crossroads among cultures.

It is while traversing this new and conflicting sense of identities, this heterotopia which is unavoidably rooted in personal experience, that conflict arises. Xiaojing precisely expands on this idea that “Lee's own feelings [result] from his experience of life in exile [...], rather than illustrating any ideas or memories which can be defined as typically Chinese” (114). In this sense, Lee's poetry lies in contrast with the works of authors like Maxine Hong Kingston, who prefer to look back to their cultural/ethnic

homeland in search of meaning. Xiaojing realizes that “Li-Young Lee's poems cannot be fully understood or appreciated by tracing his heritage” (115), owing rather to his multicultural background. This multi-faceted perspective enables him to cover any given image from many different viewpoints, allowing him to “escape ‘close and one-sidedness’ in his perception and views” (117).

Slowik complements these arguments, stating that all of Lee’s baggage as an immigrant, and especially the memories of his family fleeing from Asia, are melded with his present experience in the United States (266), arguing that the poet feels “in the middle, not having fully left Asia, not having fully embraced America” (234). In covering these gaps in the continuity of the self, as Slowik calls them, Lee blends the physical reality of his daily life in the “new” nation with the ever-present feelings and sensations of the migrant experience. In his poems, physical objects trigger sensations and reveries, filling those voids of experience: “The speakers in the poems are hyper-observant, pointing out seemingly trivial physical details attain an eerie significance against the stark background of fleeing their own countries” (Slowik, 227).

The relevance of acts and of physically small objects and their relation to issues of migration, identity, and tradition is noted by Xiaojing in the context of eating and food: “Eating for Lee is “a kind of reading” and a kind of mastering the familiar and the unknown.[...] At the same time, eating suggests a voluntary eagerness to open oneself to new things, a courage to encounter the unknown, and a capacity to absorb all with ease or pain.” (128) Food is indeed relevant in Lee’s works: the image of the seed, ever-present in his memoir, as well as the contrast between Chinese and western diets, among others, serve as devices to discuss these issues of identity and alienation. “It is the references to food and eating that enable his articulation of the universe mind and his identity as an exilic and transcendent poet (Xu, 2008).

All these acts are processed and interiorized in what Gaston Bachelard denominates the “microcosmos” of the house, the resting space where the individual can make sense of reality. Each room within this perhaps too idealized house evokes different thoughts and ideas, from the dreams of the cellar to the deep reveries of the garret. This perspective of the house is not without fault, however, especially when applied to the experiences of ethnic writers, as reflected in works of ethnic writers such as Sandra Cisneros.

1. Definitions of Home

1.1 Home and Space

Defining 'home' is a problematic task. Taking a brief look at Cambridge's and Merriam Webster's entries for the word renders a set of meanings illustrative of how deceptively simple this concept seems at first glance. Both dictionaries consider 'home' first and foremost from a purely material perspective, defining it as the physical space where an individual or their family resides, namely their house ("Home"). Indeed, Merriam Webster's first entry for 'house' is but another way of defining 'home': *a building that serves as living quarters for one or a few families: home.* ("House") It seems clear then that 'home' points first and foremost towards a material referent. The two dictionaries contemplate a second meaning, however: "someone's or something's place of origin, or the place where a person feels they belong" ("Home"). This idea of 'home' as a feeling should not only be considered as complementary to the first definition, but also ultimately necessary. Contemporary society tends to dismiss this psychological perspective, even when changes in perception and attitude can seem to alter the environment more markedly than if it had been physically changed (Tuan, 689). Establishing 'home' as merely a near synonym for house would, in turn, undermine this inherent, and more personal, meaning of the word.

It is from this more subjective dimension of the term that issues arise. Cambridge Dictionary offers yet another definition: "your own country or your own area", followed by quite an illustrative example: "She loves France, but she misses home." It is at this point that the theme of "belonging" becomes relevant. 'Home' becomes a synonym for belonging, rather than for 'house'. There may be a home without a house and, conversely, a house without a home. 'Home' may be a person, a culture or a whole nation. However, the association of the concept with physical space, as a quick dictionary search shows,

still remains a strong one, and one that generates much anxiety for those unable to make sense out of it. Many authors, especially ethnic writers such as Li-Young Lee, have resorted to portraying this anxiety in their works; works which explore, among other things, this search for a place to call 'home'.

Even though 'house' as a concept may not be very effective in capturing the whole significance of 'home', it can still be thought of as a viable framing device. The relationship between ideas and their material referents has led to an extensive study of space from various perspectives, one of them being language. In 1966, Michael Foucault proposed the concept of heterotopia as a literary topos where seemingly unreconcilable entities or concepts come together. These topoi would by their own nature "desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences" (Vidler, 19). A heterotopia stands, then, as a space for the unpronounceable to inhabit, "another space that is as perfect, as meticulous and ordered as our space is disordered, badly governed and confused" (Vidler, 19), a space that makes sense out of the senseless.

Foucault applied this line of thought to works attempting not only to describe space, but to represent it in their own physicality, concluding that, contrary to guidebooks, they offer much more than simple description of those places: those texts would be decipherings, "an excavation of the languages that are things, returning them each to its natural place"; a heterotopia in their own right. The bulk of his studies had as its goal the creation of "heterotopology", a science that would tackle the "mythical and real contestations of the space in which we live" (Vidler, 21). Thus authors, in representing houses and homes in their works, are in fact undertaking a process of codification. They turn images, memories and experiences, fictional or factual, into words in the hopes that they may accurately represent the places they intend to describe. A description of a house which at first glance may serve purely as a device for the setting of the narrative or the poem suddenly acquires a greater significance. It is at this point that the house ceases to be a mere building and turns into a home; it embodies the idea of home.

As argued at the beginning of this section, "home" does not solely refer to a specific physical location but is rather constructed by the subjectivity of the individual and, as such, it is a deeply personal concept. Tuan supports this idea of words being the foundations of place, arguing that "a great city may be seen as a construction of words as well as stone" (Tuan, 668), "Naming is power – the creative power to call something into

being, to render the invisible visible, to impart a certain character to things.” (Tuan, 668). The process of naming, of making visible, is crucial to the individual’s understanding of the world and, much more importantly, to the creation of the sense of familiarity, of homeliness: as Baudelaire said, there is no place for intimacy in a palace. Literature has a similar effect in that it is also able to change the individual’s perception of reality. Places are shaped by the stories and events that have taken place in and around them, and which have built social and personal myths.

But memories do not only grow out of real places and events: dreams constitute a fecund environment as well. So much so that Foucault’s interest was not only limited to the relationship between language and real space: he argued that our dreams constitute a deceiving heterotopic space of their own. And as a heterotopic space may be any space affected by human experience, ‘home’ positions itself once again at the center point between two distinct dimensions. The study of dreams, language, space, and the home all come together in Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*. This influential work harmonizes with Foucault’s designation of a “deciphering” of space, being in itself nothing but a guidebook-style tour around the oneiric house, and thus interestingly enough becoming its own heterotopia. To Bachelard, the house serves as a resting space where all the individual’s experiences are organized (22). The ambiguity of definitions, the complexity behind the dimensionality of the home are all simplified by the individual resting inside its walls:

“In short, in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams.” (Bachelard, 54)

Bachelard’s image of the house also coincides with Foucault’s definition of a heterotopia: a literary topos, a system of loci. Central to the analysis of the book is his division of human experience among the different levels of the house: the wishes and dreams of the individual are stored up in the attic, closest to the skies, while the oldest memories lie quiet at the depths of the cellar. To Bachelard, when accessing these thoughts, the individual is merely walking through the inner house of personal experience. Each reverie, each process of looking back or forward is a process of revisiting a well-known space, and of re-building it as well:

“We become aware of this dual vertical polarity of a house if we are sufficiently aware of the function of inhabiting to consider it as an imaginary response to the function of constructing. (Bachelard, 65)

In the end, places must be kept in good repair in order to exist. (Tuan, 689).

Rooms and floors are not the only important elements that form the oneiric house, however: it is more than just a collection of empty chambers. While the first two chapters of Bachelard's book establish the structure of the house, the following six chapters pay attention to its smaller entities, exploring the details of the objects and spaces that populate these rooms: the poetics of the small. Bachelard's words on the small are also relevant to this analysis in that they explore the symbolism of material things. The rather lofty thoughts and metaphors regarding space suddenly give way to the material, and the psychological weight individuals assign to objects.

Finally, the penultimate chapter of the book, titled "The Dialectics of Inside and Outside", provides an overview of the interactions between the house and the outer world, or the intimacy of the individual and the outside.

But as inspiring and poetic as Bachelard's take on the concept of home may be, *The Poetics of Space* is not without its flaws. His privileged perspective has in fact been subject to recent criticism, his aspirations of universality questioned, given his prominently bourgeois point of view. Bachelard's perspective on what a house is, especially concerning its spatial layout, does not apply to authors whose conditions do not allow for such luxuries. Karen W. Martin argues that Bachelard fails to acknowledge the existence of non-idyllic houses, and that the work of "marginalized authors in general [...] reflects the experience of migration and displacement lived by those whose housed memories derive from unstable, chaotic, or simply unremembered, distant homes" (Martin, 52). This is the case for many ethnic authors such as Li-Young Lee or Sandra Cisneros (the focus of Martin's study).

As much as the core idea of 'home' as this heterotopic space is sound, it seems clear then that any attempt at trying to generalize its structure or nature is bound to failure. It may be more useful to consider 'home' from a more dynamic point of view, trying to take into consideration the particular conditions of the individual or community at stake.

Nevertheless, these authors have helped to pave the way towards a more nuanced understanding of space and of the domestic, providing a theoretical base for their analysis. In the end, 'home' does not need to have a fixed structure, a strict number of floors, an attic or a cellar. Individuals may unconsciously think of their attic when dream walking, while another's thoughts may lead them to his childhood's bedroom. The important thing

to bear in mind is, despite difficulties in defining it, home's asserted adequacy as a literary and personal topos. In exploring the home of an Asian-American writer as Lee is, and having considered the basis of what makes this home what it is, it makes sense to take a look now at the idiosyncrasies of the literary group he belongs to.

1.2 Home in Asian American Poetry

After discussing the basis of what constitutes a home, it is not hard to see why the idea often becomes problematic for ethnic writers, yet the issue is deceptively more nuanced than it may seem at first glance for, beyond these 'by the book' definitions, there are individual peculiarities that need to be taken into account. For Chicano authors like Sandra Cisneros the separation between home and house seems rather clear, their spatial positioning and sphere of influence is well-demarked both physically and psychologically. For Asian-American poets, however, this separation is not as straightforward. Although these writers may write in a plethora of different languages, and from the perspective of vastly different cultures, what is clear is that one common denominator amongst them are the themes of belonging and identity, often intertwined with the idea of 'home'.

These themes lay at the core of Asian-American poetry, but it is also characterized, precisely because of its encompassing nature, by its dynamism. Although the origins of Asian-American poetry can be traced back to the last decade of the 19th century, it was not until the 1960's and 1970's, in the wake of racial and ethnic consciousness, that the idea of a shared Asian-American identity began to emerge, together with a similar term, devised, not long after, to refer to authors of Asian descent (Chang, 83). Although the movement made previously unknown works visible to a wider audience, the term has faced its fair share of criticism since its inception, both from within the group of authors it attempts to group and from outside critics. Some of these regard the term as excessively ambitious in its goal of constructing a panasiatic community, or consider that labelling it as "ethnic writing" does not help in normalizing these works (Lim, 52).

Nevertheless, not long after the creation of the term, a group of poems critical to the very foundations of the group and of extremely historical and cultural importance to the Asian-American collective were discovered in the Angel Island Immigration Station, off the coast of San Francisco. The works of these unknown detainees of Chinese origin, locked away in the years preceding WWI, speak of despair, lack of hope, and a deep yearning for home:

15

The insects chirp outside the four walls.
The inmates often sigh.
Thinking of affairs back home,
Unconscious tears wet my lapel.

19

Living on Island away from home elicits a hundred feelings.
My chest is filled with a sadness and anger I cannot bear to explain.
Night and day, I sit passively and listlessly.
Fortunately, I have a novel as my companion.

(Lai, 54)

During the Pacific War, forcibly interned Japanese immigrants faced similar hardships, prompting them to write similar poems in their cells. Together, these poems show the roots of a poetry which features hardship and discontentment at its core (Park, 11). The anxiety caused by this physical and/or cultural uprooting from the homeland is still present in the works of migrant Asian-American authors of later generations: Li-Young Lee's (born 1957) work features at its core the negotiation of identities and the memory of the journey across the Pacific, moving from home to home, from country to country, leaving behind, each time, a baggage of experiences. The similarities in themes can be easily traced. In *The Winged Seed*, Lee speaks of leaving home, of the process of emigration.

Similarly, Ocean Vuong (born 1988), a younger poet, expresses comparable feelings when talking about the journey from Vietnam to the US and his situation in the new country. The home becomes a useful resource to this author as well. In his poem *Someday I'll love Ocean Vuong*, depicts one of its rooms as fleshy, visceral, almost as a second skin, an organic being:

[...]
Your dead friends passing
through you like wind
through a wind chime. Here's a desk
with the gimp leg & a brick

to make it last. Yes, here's a room
so warm & blood-close,
I swear, you will wake—
& mistake these walls
for skin.
(Vuong, 96)

This goes to show how 'home' has remained a powerful motif among Asian-American writers since the beginning of the twentieth century. From detainees of the 1910's and 1920's, to migrants during the second half of the century. There is a need to put into words this sense of belonging, or in many cases, the search for it.

2. Analyzing Lee's Poetic House

2.1 Looking Within

2.1.1 The House and Memory

Li-Young Lee can be seen as "the dweller of the nowhere" (Manzanas, 2014), a denomination given in part by himself and one that can be better understood by glancing at his family history. Born in Indonesia to Chinese parents fleeing political prosecution, his childhood was marked by a constant moving from country to country, which eventually resulted in the Lee family settling in the United States. In *The Winged Seed*, Lee lyrically recounts this experience, how it affected himself and, most importantly, his father, a central figure in his writings and in his life.

It seems paradoxical, then, to attempt to analyze the presence of home in the writings of an author considered a "dweller of nowhere". Indeed, in "With Ruins", Lee defines 'home' as "[...] a place / for those who own no place / to correspond to ruins in the soul. / It's mine. / It's all yours." (Lee, *The City*) Yet, as Gaston Bachelard writes, "all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (27). This prompts the question of the peculiar nature of Lee's poetic home and its connection to his life experiences.

The many inhabited houses throughout Lee's life enter and disappear from his poems, mingling and mixing into a single and ever-changing entity. Lee's houses, his oneiric

‘home’, is in the end Foucault’s heterotopic space, a necessary space employed to organize feelings and memories, as illustrated in his poem “Mnemonic”:

A serious man who devised complex systems of numbers and rhymes
to aid him in remembering, a man who forgot nothing, my father
would be ashamed of me.
Not because I’m forgetful,
but because there is no order
to my memory, a heap
of details, uncatalogued, illogical.
(Lee, *Rose* 46)

The importance of memory is further explored in “This Room and Everything in It”, a poem which serves in many ways as a continuation of “Mnemonics”. In fact, its second stanza can be easily seen as a direct callback to the poem:

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

If the house encloses the whole of memory and experience, then individual recollections and moments are relived in the interior of rooms. Rooms enclose private moments. As the title suggests, this poem features a single room, where the poetic persona lays in bed with his lover. What is interesting to note here is how this poem perfectly illustrates this idea of space as a heterotopic device: how the poet associates memories and experiences, all seemingly disjointed and unrelated, with physical objects. The poet expresses his desire to convert the room into a loci:

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

What follows is a series of associations between sensorial stimuli, coming from the immediate physical space surrounding him, and ideas and feelings: ‘love cries’ for ‘distance’, the scent of the loved one for ‘mystery’, the ‘sun on the face of the wall’ for ‘God’, his body for ‘estrangement’... But the link between ideas and objects is not the only one present, as these objects bring back memories as well:

Your sunken belly
is the daily cup
of milk I drank
as a boy before morning prayer.
(Lee, *The City*)

The poet reflects how, in the future, he will use all these associations, which link the present with the past, to remind him of what love is:

and so on, each thing
standing for a separate idea,
and those ideas forming the constellation
of my greater idea.
And one day, when I need
to tell myself something intelligent
about love,

I'll close my eyes
And recall this room and everything in it
(Lee, *The City*)

It is worth discussing, together with these links the poet makes, the actual setting of the poem. The poet, having just had sexual intercourse with his partner (“your love cries, / those spacious notes of a moment ago”) seems to fall into a reverie, looking at the room and at his lover. It is a scene of deep intimacy, yet in his reverie he remains anchored to his immediate reality. Gaston Bachelard notes how “The poet lives a daydream that is awake, but above all, his daydream remains in the world, facing worldly things. It gathers the universe together around and in an object.” (Bachelard, 122), a fitting idea for this poem. This object Bachelard mentions is in fact the book ruffled by the wind, a recurring object with great symbolic power in this poem, which guards both the future and the past.

[...] The book
on the windowsill, riffled by the wind...
the even-numbered pages are
the past, the odd-
numbered pages, the future.
(Lee, *The City*)

Small objects acquire an immense relevance in the poems of Li-Young Lee. As Bachelard reflects, “one of the powers of attraction of smallness lies in the fact that large things can issue from small ones.” (Bachelard, 142), a world within a grain of sand. Much like the second stanza of “This Room and Everything in It” sharing a similar theme with “Mnemonics”, this book reappears in *The Winged Seed*: “Reading first the odd-numbered pages, and then the even, he read out loud, while all one hundred rooms of the house of the seed echoed with the sound of a hand reading.” (Lee, 184), in which Lee equates the ever-present winged seed of his memoir with his oneiric home.

Similarly, and connected to this image of the seed, other objects are also the focus to this association, in particular fruits. Lee employs metaphors to describe the residing place of memories, or the nature of memory itself. If in “This Room and Everything in It”, it is

the very room which becomes the desired loci, in “From Blossoms”, this role is fulfilled by an orchard the poet walks through. It describes the process of placing memories in an adequate place in order to nurture them, and enjoy them at a later point in time:

O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard,
to eat not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days,
to hold the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilation of peach.
(Lee, *Rose* 17)

“Persimmons” offers yet another example of the use of fruit subjects, although here the poem takes place in the home itself, in the cellar: “Once, in the cellar, I found two wrapped in newspaper, / forgotten and not yet ripe. / I took them and set both on my bedroom windowsill, / where each morning a cardinal / sang,” (Lee, *Rose* 14) This is a fitting location, according to Bachelard, who states that “to go down to the cellar is to dream, losing oneself [...] looking for treasures that cannot be found in words” (176). That is precisely what Lee does, rummaging in the cellar.

This year, in the muddy lighting
of my parents’ cellar, I rummage, looking
for something I lost.
[...]
Under some blankets, I find a box.
Inside the box I find three scrolls.
I sit beside him and untie
three paintings by my father:
Hibiscus leaf and a white flower.
Two cats preening.
Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.
(Lee, *Rose* 14)

The poem, much like the cellar itself, is filled with small objects that are in fact symbols. The three scrolls Lee finds inside the box are obvious reminders of his father’s culture, but they also express Lee’s distancing from the culture of his parents. These familiar faces and well-known objects are central to the making of a house. A contrasting view to these object-filled houses of the two previous poems is presented in “With Ruins”. Here, the poet walks through a house in ruins, which he describes as merely “a sketch, notes to a house” and urges the reader to bring their own memories to fill it with:

You think
of a woman, a favorite
dress, your old father’s breasts
the last time you saw him, his breath,
brief, the leaf
you’ve torn from a vine and which you hold now
to your cheek like a train ticket

or a piece of cloth, a little hand or a blade—
it all depends
on the course of your memory.
(Lee, *The City*)

It seems that every house needs human experience to really become a house. Its nature depends entirely on the personal experience of the individual. In the end, the oneiric house molds itself to the inhabitant, and vice versa. “My Father’s House” serves as a confirmation:

How much a house is house at all due
to one room where an elder child reads
to his brother. And the younger knows by heart
the brother-voice.
(Lee, *Book of My Nights* 19)

2.1.2 The House and Migration

Seeing that it is the inhabitant who molds the house, as tempting as it may seem to apply Bachelard’s “topography” of the house word by word to Lee’s poems, this may soon prove problematic. When Li-Young Lee remembers his childhood, there are no tender rooms ready to offer him solace. “A Hymn to Childhood” presents a young Lee who, heading for the attic, is not welcomed by Bachelard’s promised clear thoughts (65) but is instead afraid of the ladder leading up there instead. The atmosphere of violence and prosecution he and his family had to endure had turned the rooms of his house at the time into hostile, empty spaces:

Childhood? Which childhood?
The one that didn’t last?
The one in which you learned to be afraid
of the boarded-up well in the backyard
and the ladder to the attic?

The one presided over by armed men
in ill-fitting uniforms
strolling the streets and alleys,

and the house around you grew bigger,
the rooms farther apart, with more and more
people missing?
(Lee, *Behind My Eyes* 17)

Through similar explorations of the domestic, Lee progressively discloses more and more information about his often traumatic experiences as a migrant, both during his

forced journey through Asia and after his arrival in the US. In approaching Lee's poems, the reader is taken on a journey not so different from those Lee had to experience accompanying his father, visiting the bizarre and often gruesome houses of those parishioners who needed to be administered communion (Lee, 64). Much like in Maxine Kingston's *The Warrior Woman*, silence is ever-present in many of his poems, as is in his account of those trips, a silence that nevertheless is far from incarcerating:

“On Sundays, if we weren't making rounds, we were at home observing silence. Keeping everything to ourselves in the one house of three floors of square rooms and identical doors. It was clarifying, the quiet, and our stillness felt like a deep liberty.” (Lee, *The Winged Seed* 65-66)

Just as silently as he felt in those moments, when Lee speaks of scenes that took place in past houses, he does so from the point of view of a silent, quiet child, who passively, and many times voyeuristically, watches or listens to what is happening in the rooms that surround him.

And if someone who listened for years
one night hears *Home*,
what is he to do with the story
his bones hum to him
about the dust?
(Lee, *Book of My Nights* 25)

This silence, however, only hides the burden of experience. Lee is unable to mute the sound of home, which has become buried so deeply and intimately into his psyche that his own bones hum it to him. There is an interesting contrast in the way Lee employs the word 'hum' between this poem and a previous one from his first book, *Rose*. In “Rain Diary”, it is his mother who hums, bringing him back to his body:

It's not a host of heaven this morning
but my mother's voice
from another room
which wakens me.
A sweet tune she hums
to accompany the human task of making the bed
calls me back
to this body.
(Lee, *Rose* 42)

This 'hum' is not that different from the one coming from the bones of the first poem. In fact, this sweetness of the memory of his mother making the bed has become, with the passage of time, an unavoidable and bittersweet reminder of the past. The familiarity of domestic sounds fills the gap left by the lack of spoken words.

The attention he gives to his childhood and, therefore, to his experiences as a migrant varies from book to book: while in *Rose*, his first volume of poetry, he is more interested in the significance of small objects and of actions, nearing Bachelard's ideas of the house as a protective shell (in poems such as "Persimmons" and "From Blossoms"), following volumes feature a poet increasingly concerned not only with personal memory but also with the experience of migration, especially in volumes such as *The City in Which I Love You* and *Behind my Eyes*. As Slowik comments: "Lee reconstruct[s] the migration experience with an intense omniscience. The speakers in the poems are hyper-observant, pointing out seemingly trivial physical details which attain an eerie significance against the stark background of people fleeing their own countries." (227) Again, the small attains great significance. This fourth volume of poetry is arguably the one where he is most honest in talking about his experience as a migrant.

In contrast with this increased awareness of migratory issues, the characteristics and prevalence of the house does not differ heavily from book to book. Although at first the increasing poems dedicated to his life as a husband and father begin to be featured more and more heavily, he never puts aside his personal memories. The house of his first compositions is not the same as the house of the later ones. Even many of the early elements this house guarded, such as his father, almost omnipresent in his earlier volumes, do not fade away. Lee is able to combine both his experiences as a husband and a father with those of being a migrant. This contrast is visible, for example, when comparing a prose fragment of *The Winged Seed*:

"It seems I heard the pendulum's last tick a long time ago. Ages ago. As though it came out of childhood, where in my father's house, a clock counted passerby all night, and in the morning, I had to sweep up the strewn minutes from every corner, buttons, needles, and seeds, and no two alike. The last tick was long ago." (Lee, *The Winged Seed* 42)

with verses from his latest poetry book, *The Undressing*:

The Word is an open book,
and its first and last pages are missing.

It is a brother and sister
telling each other
the missing parts
of one's another's stories.

It is the lover and the beloved
Constantly changing places in the fire.
(Lee, *The Undressing*, 48)

Here there are repeated motifs present in already commented poems, such as ‘the book’ from “This Room and Everything in It” and “Mnemonics”, or the brother speaking to his brother, similar to “My Father’s House”. Here, however, the inclusion of the lover and the beloved into the metaphor illustrates this shift. In many ways the poetic persona is not simply present at this house, in its rooms, now the house surrounds the poet. It home makes room for reveries about the present, a present that nevertheless does not forget the past. This is also evident in poems such as the previously analyzed “This Room and Everything in It”. The hardships of his migratory past are made more bearable in the intimacy of his home, with his wife and children.

This house stands, introspective, as guardian and panopticon of the self and the world, with each of its instances more or less consistently giving shelter to a distinct set of emotions, dreams, memories... It is a hub the poet can access and from which he can select what to give a voice to. An important purpose for an author who has gone through the hardships of migration.

2.2 Looking Beyond the House

Of course, the house does not stand isolated in the mindscape. There are ways in which the individual can interact with what is outside the house, or even with other loci. The window is another recurring image in Lee’s poems which most times, paradoxically, calls for inner reflection rather than outer gazing. There is an evolution in the way the poet gazes from these windows. In Lee’s early volumes, such as *Rose*, they are a place from where the poet can interact with birds, trees and the natural world, as in “Falling: The Code”:

I lie beneath my window listening
to the sound of apples dropping in

the yard, a syncopated code I long to know,
(Lee, *Rose* page 22)

Similarly to objects within the house, the symbolism of the window itself and of that which is seen from it tends to be more nuanced; looking outside often becomes a reflective task, in reality another way of looking inwards. “My Favorite Kingdom” features an

illustrative example of this use of windows and perspectives. The poet no longer looks at apples falling from a nearby trees, he now gazes at two oceans: a house and a book. The house symbolizing the poet as a whole, employing all the experiences present in this recurring book to negotiate his identity, in turn leaving this house in “various stages of ruin and beginning”:

My favourite window
looks onto two oceans:

one a house
in various stages of ruin and beginning,

and one a book,
whose every word is outcome,
whose every page is lifelong sentence
(Lee, *Behind my Eyes* page 25)

A similar image concludes “Descended from Dreamers”, from the same volume:

Looking out the window
one of us witnessed what kept vanishing,
while the other watched what continually emerged.
(Lee, *Behind my Eyes* page 34)

This poet himself recognizes that this process of self-reflection is not without danger. In *Seven Marys*, Lee writes about the peril of fixating too much into the past, and how it can hinder development.

Whoever stays too long at childhood’s window
leaves earth shadow unsung.
(Lee, *Behind my Eyes* page 33)

Although the house remains the center of his psyche, from time to time, Lee’s poems also venture into other heterotopias, other spaces built from experiences other than his. Given that his father is such a prominent figure in his life, and that his importance has been translated into his poem, it is no wonder that many of these spaces are related to him. In the second part of “Furious Versions”, a very alliterative poem, the poetic voice speaks about walking “the halls as if the halls / of that other mansion, my father’s heart.” (Lee, *The City*) He is looking for his father in a derelict house not so different from that of “With Ruins”, only to find that he is long gone, being left with a door which “slams and slams / without meaning / to and without meaning”. (Lee, *The City*)

Conclusion

This paper proposes a new way of looking at the work of Li-Young Lee. By looking at the poem from the point of view of the 'house', the reader may interpret it as an oneiric space employed as what Michael Foucault called a heterotopia, a means of ordering the unorderable. This space, however, is not chaotic: following Gaston Bachelard's schema of the oneiric house as proposed in *The Poetics of Space*, this analysis sees the domestic heterotopia as an ordered and rather rational space in itself, pointing out the connections between memory and domestic spaces.

This blueprint of the oneiric house, bourgeois at its root, does not realistically apply to most ethnic authors, whose personal experiences may have not afforded them the privilege of a three-story house such as the one Bachelard describes. Nevertheless, the domestic is very much present in the works of Asian-American poets, who also employ it, to greater or lesser extent, to evoke themes of childhood, longing and belonging.

Li-Young Lee's poems express the importance of domestic scenes throughout his life, both during his childhood with his parents and siblings, and especially his father (in the various homes, both experienced and unexperienced, from China to Indonesia) to his present life with his wife and children. Although the purpose of all these houses, to process memory, remains virtually unchanged throughout his books, the perspective from which he writes does shift. While in the early poems of *Rose* Lee primarily walks the house of memory to access the past, by the time he writes later volumes such as *The Undressing*, he is able to link the past and the present, to interconnect the various loci the guard his past with the new experiences of the present. This linking of reality with feeling and memory would not be possible without the objects that populate these houses, which serve as symbolic beacons which guide the poet through memory. His vision is not purely egocentric, however, as he ventures 'outside' by looking through windows or by walking into other houses of memory, especially that of his father. In the end, all these houses and experiences all come together to form Lee's idea of 'home', from which he deals with matters of belonging and identity as an Asian-American. By identifying and analyzing concrete instances of these domestic spaces, this paper has explored its viability as a poetic framework, as well as its relevance for this author, and the whole of Asian-American poetry.

A more exhaustive analysis may provide new perspectives on the use of domesticity and its effects in the poem. This perspective may also be employed and expanded in analyzing other Asian-American writers or ethnic writers.

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