Yellow Temporalities:

Time is out of joint in the diaspora

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There's a new moon in the dark sky

Like a yellow boat I long to ride

Across the milky ocean like the sailing gypsies

Roaming homes in kingdoms of one man islands

Outside the self-doubt of a velvet prison

free from Gordian tangled knots of accursed shares

Drifting like the weightless clouds

Above and away from the tear-stained bleeding heart snares

Joy of Living, entry from Lee Wen's blog, 2014[1]

'The time is out of joint.' The formula speaks of time, it also says the time, but it refers singularly to this time, to an 'in these times, the time of these times, the time of this world' which was for Hamlet an 'our time,' only a 'this world, this age and no other.' This predicate says something of time and says it in the present of the verb to be ('The time is out of joint'), but if it says it then, in that other time, in the past perfect, one time in the past, how would it be valid for all times? In other words, how can it come back and present itself again, anew, as the new?

Jacques Derrida from *Spectres of Marx*, 1993[2]

[1] Wen Lee, 'Joy of Living', *Republic of Daydreams* (blog), 2 January 2014, https://republicofdaydreams.wordpress.com/2014/01/02/joy-of-living-a-prelude-to-why-i-decided-not-to-present-performance-art-in-singapore-under-the-compulsory-need-to-apply-for-a-license/.

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, vol. 7 (Routledge, 1994), 61.

Figure 1. Lee Wen, *Journey of a Yellow Man No.15: Index to Freedom,* 1994, Fukuoka, Japan. Image courtesy of Lee Wen's estate and Asia Art Archive.

Introduction

A *Yellow Man* traverses the world on foot. He leaves no trace, only a bright lemon yellow figure who walks into places where he does not originate, only afforded a present. The *Yellow* Man is, for lack of other descriptors, bright yellow. He does many things with this painted yellowness: he puts himself in chains, reads papers, prays, walks, dances, sings, washes it off, and puts it on. He exists in a strange spatio-temporality: he evidently possesses a past, otherwise how would he have come to be so noticeably yellow in a space that is so obviously not? Yet the *Yellow Man* makes his physical presence a present conception despite his own memories. His past renders itself completely in its present, or more particularly, its immediacy. He interrupts the teleology of his foreign space, being so yellow that he cannot go ignored. His time is out of joint, a mar against a homogenous time.

Lee Wen is an ethnically Chinese Singaporean artist whose longest series of performances, *Journey of a Yellow Man,* has been read as a parody of hyper-racialisation. In the series, Lee's *Yellow Man* persona ardently covers his naked body in poster yellow paint, clad only in underwear, questioning a homogenising, empiricist view of Chineseness.[3] The series was performed from 1992 to 2012 in a myriad of countries and first took root in London, first beginning in 'mediation between his British viewers and his Yellow Man archetype,'[4] and in the ensuing 20 years, timed apart in their various site-specific contexts. The many iterations of the performance pivot on the same bright yellow man, where Lee, who is Chinese diaspora, questions his racially marked Sinophone body through its archetype of being Yellow, using everyday props and deliberate gestures. The *Yellow Man* is not static because he is *journeying*;

[3] Queensland Art Gallery, ed., 'Lee Wen', in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, South Brisbane, Qld., Australia: Queensland Art Gallery, 1999).

[4] Ashleigh Chow, 'Of "Yellow": Performing Orientalisms and Cultural Hybridity in Lee Wen's "Journey of a Yellow Man No. 1"', *Columbia Journal of Art History*, Winter 2021.

his yellow reality is predicated on him in flux. He is only yellow because he is surrounded constantly by not-yellows. *Journey of a Yellow Man* is tethered to a condition of being diaspora.

The word diaspora is derived from the Greek word διασπορά, which literally translates to dispersal, or seed-sowing. A diaspora is an essential parting and scattering, a dispersion; to be diaspora is already to be 'branded by the mark of distance.'[5] It has departed from what was once home (an ancestral home, a motherland), much like an apostatic move, because they know they no longer belong where they originated. The diaspora is a transnational, spatial, socio-cultural[6] formation of migrated imaginings, communities with vacillating boundaries. Diasporas are necessarily temporal, kept alive by their uncertain relationship with their past, constantly negotiating between their nows and thens.

The Nanyang diaspora describes the ethnic Chinese diaspora that migrated from China to British Southeast Asia during the late 19th to early 20th centuries. My own paternal great-grandmother, despite her worsening dementia, endlessly recounted the story of how she travelled down to Singapore on a tiny sampan[7]to marry out of Chaoshan for better opportunities. Meanwhile, my maternal great-grandmother, carrying my grandmother on her back, had walked from Fujian down French Vietnam and Siam (now Thailand) to enter British Malaya. These anecdotes are far from rare. When the British colonised Southeast Asian territories, its rapidly developing, well-connected trade routes of the Straits Settlements were alluring to an unstable, late 19th century Qing-era Chinese population, who lost massive swathes of its Southern regions to colonial Southeast Asia. Fleeing from chronic rebellions and revolutions, 'few riots [were] unaccompanied by the extermination of China's rank and file to the extent

[5] Ranajit Guha, 'The Migrant's Time', *Postcolonial Studies* 1, no. 2 (1 July 1998): 155–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/13688799890101.

[6] Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2001).

[7] A Chinese shoe-boat.

that it may be of hundreds or otherwise of thousands.'[8] British Malaya was possibly one of the few places where '[British] colonialism did more good than bad,'[9] and its colonial baggage hinted less of animosity than that of nostalgia.[10] Singapore, especially, given its strategic maritime location on the world map, projected itself as a 'successful mixed-race child of empire.'[11] The colonial landscape was desirable enough for Southern Chinese coolie workers (苦力, or kǔ lì) to leave China, potentially never to return.

The Nanyang's ancestral parenthood belonged to China, and hence ascribed it with a cultural sanctity; the permanence of this departure amounted to a sort of transgression. Diasporic migration, as such, has the connotation of being forsaken; its historical basis is the loss of 'communal identity and his struggle to find another… The conditions in which that first identity was formed are no longer available to him.' This separation cemented an independent Nanyang identity distinct from its Chinese predecessors.

Curiously, such a Nanyang identity, distinct from Chineseness, is incurably Chinese in nature; Brian Axel explains how 'diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and of attachment.'[12] The myth of the homeland, or place of origin, is a constant object of collective memory, desire, and attachment, to a point where it becomes constitutive to the diaspora. The migrant integrates, changes, or as Rosínska says, 'his awareness and consciousness will have been irrevocably altered.'[13]

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[8] H.T.M. Bell and H.G.W. Woodhead, *The China Year Book*, The China Year Book (G. Routledge & sons, limited, 1929).

[9] Joel Tan, 'Three Recipes for the Singapore Sling', *Mynah Magazine*, 2019.

[10] This was also a narrative that the state pushed for in order to maintain good relations with the West even after independence.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Brian Keith Axel, 'The Diasporic Imaginary', *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (1 May 2002): 411–28, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-2-411.

[13] Zofia Rosińska, 'Emigratory Experience':, in *Memory and Migration*, ed. Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzmann (University of Toronto Press, 2011), 31.

Here I assert that the diaspora exists in temporal precarity, undecided in its temporal conundrum; diasporic time is *out of joint*. Everything in it is inextricably tangled in an initial memory of movement, predisposed to constantly turning back. The diaspora exists in a deviated time. The very first time I encountered *Yellow Man*, ironically, was after Lee passed in 2019, in the archive he started, surrounded by boxes of documents and empty plastic tubes of acrylic lemon-yellow paint. The first symptom of being diaspora is to always be predisposed to looking back, to scour, to remember. The diaspora tries to be part of a linear time, but in doing so, it fails.

I also take up Hamlet's famous line in the title, "The time is out of joint,"[14] in order to conceptualise a mycelial and spatial relationship between movement and time. This uncanny relationship between Shakespeare and *Yellow Man* cannot help but be characterised by knowing that time is relative, especially in the context of both their relationships to the theatrical. Given the overtly theatrical nature of *Journey of a Yellow Man,* reading Lee Wen in parallel to Shakespeare reveals circumstances and potentials in which time is relative and constructed through a performance. Time being out of joint simply means that time is interrupted and disjointed. Hamlet utters this in response to learning of his uncle's past crimes, feeling as if the state of affairs were in disarray, that what he understands of the world is suddenly different, and therefore, his relation to it is disconnected. *Journey of a Yellow Man* facilitates a similar experience, where the bright yellow interrupts a time not his own, unfolding in a space that sees him as foreign. Deleuze writes that 'Hamlet is the first hero who truly needed time in order to act,' [15] where he experiences time itself as being a site for action. The question at hand here is therefore not how this time can be overcome, but rather how this time relates to Hamlet's actions, in which he is unable to associate with the past, and therefore can

[14] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (London: The Folio Society, 1954).
[15] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (Athlone Press, 1994), 111.

only surrender to his disjointed time. Applying this to the diaspora, I observe how the diaspora is governed by a fundamental passivity to a time liberated from chronology, and how they, similarly, exist in a state of relation to a past disconnected from a present.

The chapters in this dissertation elucidate the temporal polysemy of a Nanyang Chineseness, observed through Lee Wen's *Journey of a Yellow Man.* This dissertation is constructed such that each point made is fluid, in order to mimic the decentralised and coextensive structures of post-colonial diasporic discourse. I seek to un-privilege successive time in this dissertation by moving laterally and fluidly within chapters rather than linearly.

The first chapter traces an overarching, historiological perspective of memory work in Singapore. By understanding that memory is temporal in nature and manifests through an immediacy that is expressed not only through theatrical gestures and performance in Lee's work, but also through the oppressive state, I form a theoretical framework through the diaspora's reliance on memory, and therefore infer that it is perpetually influenced by the past. Lee's memory formations are also affiliated with Foucault's conception of the counter-memorial, which work against hegemonic, oppressive narratives that seek to prioritise a politically viable imagery. The diaspora, founded on memories, here emerges as a fluid, decentred web of interconnected spatial temporalities that defy a stable, fixed identity, or narrative coherence.

In the second chapter, I contemplate an existent liminality that the diaspora faces. Through an idea of placelessness, I locate the diaspora within the threshold, between the before and the after, an unstable time-space in which the diaspora contends with anxieties over signifiers of identity, such as language. An aesthetic of rootlessness dominates this, especially in Lee's performance of *Yellow Man* in China, alongside Eileen Chang's rendering of the Huaqiao, which montages signifiers from disparate times and places. In general, Chinese diaspora are

known as Huaqiao (华侨, huá qiáo) by the mainland Chinese populace, which literally translates to Overseas Chinese. I align Chang's writing with Homi Bhabha's *Third Space* to facilitate what I mean by the threshold, or the in-between, where what I mean by the threshold is not a separate distinct space but one that is always unsure, that acquires balance through oscillating between spatio-temporal extremities.

Finally, the third chapter locates the sites of *Journey of a Yellow Man* in ritual space-time. I define ritual as intentional acts that are repetitive in nature, which delivers memory through the liminal. The ritual gesture, or the act, is thus construed as the threshold between the *Yellow Man* and his performance sites. I develop the link between Lee's methodologies of walking within the performance to Vipassana meditative practices, which call to Buddhist concepts of Anattā, or the no-self, in order to unpack a spatio-temporal fusion between the body and the site afflicted by their once-individual memories. Thus, the chapter closes the circle for which the diaspora is suspended in: the diaspora, who exists in the threshold, grounded in memories, is compelled to manifest the affects of this phenomenon through ritualistic repetition.

Journey of a Yellow Man never intended to stay within. He perpetually travels, even through this dissertation, circling his careful walk and resolute gaze through the borders of the chapters and time. He begins outside of.

> Our first migrant is in a temporal dilemma… He must learn to live with this [double-bind] until the next generation arrives on the scene with its own time, overdetermining and thereby re-evaluating his temporality in a new round of conflicts and convergences.[16]

[16] Guha, 'The Migrant's Time'.

What the Yellow Man remembers

> *… WE HAVE BEEN RIDING ON THAT SAME BUS ALL THESE YEARS ONLY PROBLEM SOME ARE TRYING TO DRIVE IN DRUNKENESS OR NOT CLEAR HOW TO OR MAYBE DRIVING US OVER THE CLIFF OR JUST GOING ROUND IN CIRCLES CLAIMING WE ARE MOVING ON. BUT ACTUALLY THE BUS GOT AN OUTDATED ENGINE 300YEARS OLD … CAUSE WE HAVE NOT MOVED AN INCH FOR 20 YEARS…*
>
> *Dead Art Daydream Action #55*, entry from Lee Wen's blog, 2014.[17]

I precede this chapter with a quote from Lee Wen, who expresses a deep frustration for an immobile bus, a feeling of going in circles. This chapter's primary purpose is to, through *Journey of a Yellow Man*, lay foundations against an often linear, consistent and laminar notion of time. I argue that the diaspora experiences time primarily through memory, and Lee catalyses this through performance, which I will expound here as a form of *memory work*.

I begin this chapter with one of Lee's final bodies of work before his death, *The Body As Archive*, an opener for Lee's retrospective for *Journey of a Yellow Man* that took place in 2018.

[17] Wen Lee, 'Dead Art Daydream Action #55', *Republic of Daydreams* (blog), 13 February 2014, https://republicofdaydreams.wordpress.com/2014/02/13/dead-art-daydream-action-55/.

Figure 2. Lee Wen, *The Body as Archive,* 2018. Ice block, red dress, paper documents. Gillman Barracks, Singapore. Image courtesy of Plural Art Mag and the Independent Archive.

A red slip dress is cast in a massive block of ice, with 'memories' of past *Yellow Man* performances plastered onto the icy surface,[18] melting under the sweltering, humid tropical sun. The red dress references another work titled *The Call of the Red: The Widow* (see Fig. 3), a performance where he slips into his mother's character and calls for her dead husband. While we see no yellow man, there is, in this work, the same blocky, choreographed use of colour; Lee employs here a use of theatrics that call to the same symbolistic methodology used throughout his oeuvre.

Figure 3. Lee Wen, *The Call of the Red: The Widow*, 2013. Red dress, performance. Chicago, United States of America. Image courtesy of iPreciation.

[18] Wen Lee, *The Body as Archive*, 2018, Ice, red dress, papers, 2018.

In fact, I posit that Lee consistently turns to the theatrical in order to contend with both memory under the oppressive state. Through this, I observe that Lee conceives performance art as memory-work that seeks to counter-memorialise against an authoritarian, linear metanarrative of progress, thereby cementing memory as an unmooring of time.

Memory is temporal. There is no conception of memory not tied to an idea of time, for memory occurs on the basis that time has passed, but I will go further to define this as a construction of the past we must acknowledge as an immediacy. Memories are not chronologically organised,[19] and manifest as a continuous re-creation and re-interpretation of past events through the present. There is no forgetting or misremembering as this suggests there is a fixed *truth* to the past. Memory work does not rest at a *truth*. Rather, it wades around its multitude of constructions. It is not a passive repository of fixed images or representations, but generative, active, and changing process of actualising the before into the after. It is made up of speech-acts that constantly affirm or disrupt establishments that insist on truths, 'producing memory formations … record[ing] the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality … breaking up historical continuity.'[20]

Such a definition of memory aligns with Foucault's concept of counter-memory, developed in 1971,[21] which has come to be deployed as means by which to frame a construction of history for the disenfranchised. It also is an 'act of resistance' which debunks 'institutionalised, hegemonic memory.'[22] Counter-memory is therefore a dualistic notion as it was founded

[19] Christoph Hoerl and Teresa McCormack, eds., *Time and Memory: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*, Consciousness and Self-Consciousness (Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 2001), 79.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Verónica Tello, *Counter-Memorial Aesthetics: Refugee Histories and the Politics of Contemporary Art*, Radical Aesthetics, Radical Art (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing PIc, 2016).

[22] Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance* (London: Tauris, 2007).

against 'positivist thinking' that 'sought to promote rigid and State-oriented conceptions of the past.'[23] Foucault founded the term to *'critique the notion of the singular monument born of a single origin,'* in order to allow 'repressed archives, documents, images'[24] to be given similar significance to those invested with power. This chapter will hence unpack the oppressive state, how it shaped the development of performance art in Singapore, and thereby which renderings of memory are officially sanctioned and which are swept under the rug.

Theatre is inclined to 'inscribe the site of memory.'[25] The theatrical, in this chapter, apart from relating to theatre, will also signify an exaggeration and affectation.[26] I take on Michael Fried's view on theatricality which first emerged in his essay, *Art and Objecthood,* referring to a 'theatricality of objecthood'[27] in which [art] objects are in a 'space with oneself,'[28] yet also possess an audience, in which theatre 'exists for.'[29] This critique is positioned in modernist art, which hinges on a permanent objecthood; ironically, I draw focus to his comment that the theatrical constitutes a sense of immediacy, where he elaborates:

> It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness… of evoking or constituting, a continuous and perpetual present. [30]

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[23] Tello, *Counter-Memorial Aesthetics*.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Lidija Kapushevska-Drakulevska, 'Theatre as a Figure and a Place of Cultural Memory' (Skopje, Macedonia, Blazhe Koneski Faculty of Philology Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, n.d.).

[26] Lisa Lewis, 'On Memory', *Performance Research* 23, no. 4–5 (4 July 2018): 409–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2018.1507729.l

[27] Ibidis, 160.

[28] Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 2', *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (1966).

[29] Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[30] Ibid.

The logic of theatre, seen in performance art, has a tendency toward the realities of here and now, given the way it occupies, confronts, and communicates spatially and temporally. The theatrical present collides with the past when used as a function of recollection, implicit in the notion of memory that I defined earlier as a construction of the past that is immediate. In this sense, the use of the theatrical in performance art is favourable in construing memory, which Lee adopts.

This mode of aesthetic expression had proven necessary and ironically effective against an overarching environment of state censorship that Lee had grown up alongside in the 90s, following the all-encompassing, ten-year long withdrawal for funding towards performance art after Singaporean artist, Josef Ng's *Brother Cane* (1994). This work was done in a symbolic protest against police entrapment of homosexuals, where gay men were punished by caning, jail, and public outings through news exposés. Ng laid out twelve blocks of tofu to represent the men implicated in the witch-hunt, then, using a rattan cane, whipped the tofu into oblivion. He then famously walked to a corner of the space, facing away from the audience, and snipped off his pubic hair, before presenting it on a plate.[31] No one could see what he was doing while he was turned away. 3 days after the performance, Ng had to stand trial, where he plead guilty (to public obscenity).

[31] Nai Wee Chng, 'Josef Ng' (Singapore Art, n.d.), http://biotechnics.org/2josefng.html.

Figure 4. Josef Ng, *Brother Cane, 1994.* Ng holding cane. Performance still from analog video documentary by Ray Langenbach at Artists' General Assembly, 5th Passage Parkway Parade, Singapore. Image courtesy of Ray Langenbach.

Figure 5. Josef Ng, *Brother Cane*, 1994. Ng facing away from audience. Performance still from analog video documentary by Ray Langenbach at Artists' General Assembly, 5th Passage Parkway Parade, Singapore. Image courtesy of Ray Langenbach.

This was branded as 'vulgar… extremely distasteful' by the National Arts Council, who denounced the genre entirely, proclaiming that 'by no stretch of imagination can such acts be construed and condoned as art. Such acts, in fact, debase art and lower the public's esteem for art and artists in general.' [32]

There are things we can glean here about the push for a hegemonic state narrative, of a monumental, homogenising tool for nation-building: one, censorship was a key tool to achieve this, or what is nationally cemented as OB markers (Out-of-Bounds markers).[33] A colloquial term used in Singapore, OB markers demarcate the boundaries of what the government considers acceptable political discourse and expressions. Secondly, that the state consolidated cultural power[34] by founding institutions such as the National Arts Council and the National Heritage Board. This was done to produce and promote coherent national image of social cohesion as a new nation, and in the process, cultivating a national acceptance (or indifference) to the suppression of cultural memories deemed to be divisive. In the early years of independence, this projected an image of a sovereign nation to ensure survival and freedom from immediate superpower influence (the largest of whom was China). However, this eventually cemented a normalised, national subjugation of power to the internal state, where pushing for change was a far greater risk than most would be willing to take. *Brother Cane*'s criticism was led by state-owned journalism, whose hegemonic influence over the country skewed public furore against Ng.[35] However, Lee Wen has never shied away from political

[32] Wei Hao Goh, 'Performing Protest in Singapore: Performance Tactics in Brother Cane and Don't Give Money to the Arts', *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, 5 April 2023, 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/00233609.2023.2181864.

[33] Lenore LYONS and James GOMEZ, 'Moving Beyond the OB Markers: Rethinking the Space of Civil Society in Singapore', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 20, no. 2 (2005): 119–31.

[34] Clarissa Oon, 'The National Arts Council', in *The State and the Arts in Singapore*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: World Scientific, 2018), 181–89, https://doi.org/10.1142/10899.

[35] Goh, 'Performing Protest in Singapore: Performance Tactics in Brother Cane and Don't Give Money to the Arts'.

discourse in his performance; in fact, he produces a piece of personal irate writing in response to the bureaucratic hurdles set in place after *Brother Cane*:

> I MADE RESOLUTION AT BEGINNING OF THE YEAR I SHALL NOT PARTICIPATE IN ANY EVENT IF I HAVE TO APPLY FOR A LICENSE TO PERFORM. THIS APPLIES TO ME ONLY...[36]

Even in *The Body as Archive*, Lee moves in to greet the audience while the ice block melts, calling them 'fellow prisoners … in paradise.'[37] However, he intends this as a term of endearment, facing a literal melting monument of fragments of *Journey of a Yellow Man*. Theatricality aids Lee because he uses affect and symbolism as a smokescreen to political critique, and further suspends these memories in gestures and improvisation. Lee builds up a repertoire of visual and gestural symbolisms comparable to that of Joseph Beuys[38], whose imaginative happenings synthesised 'strategically planned and improvised'[39] theatrical activity. The signification of the materials used (fat, felt, wool; ice, yellow paint, red dress) tended to heighten the viewer's awareness of everyday objects and realities in order to mirror issues and obligations[40] of (both German and Nanyang) past and present.

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[36] Wen Lee and Jason Wee, *Boring Donkey Songs*, First edition (Singapore: Grey Projects, 2017).

[37] Ho Pei Ying, 'From Stranger to Friend', *Plural Art Mag*, 11 October 2018, https://pluralartmag.com/2018/10/11/from-stranger-to-friend/.

[38] '-Happening- Joseph Beuys', accessed 20 April 2023, http://creativegames.org.uk/modules/Art_Technology/Happening/happening_beuys.htm.

[39] Jennifer Thibault, 'The Role of Art in Memory: Case Study of Joseph Beuys and Kara Walker' (Boston College, 2007), http://hdl.handle.net/2345/507.

[40] Mark Rosenthal et al., *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments* (Houston : New Haven, Conn: Menil Collection ; Distributed by Yale University Press, 2004).

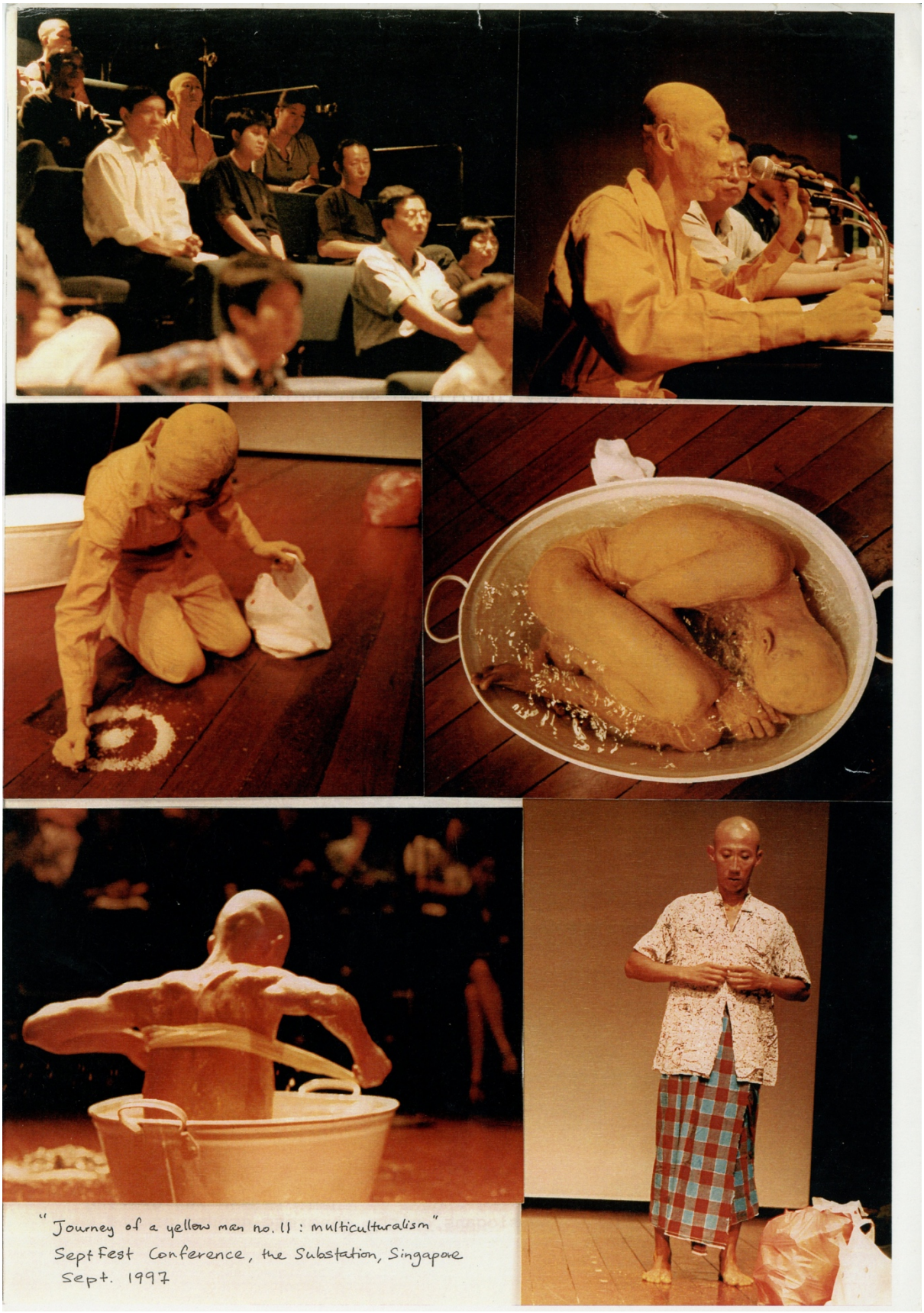

Figure 6. Lee Wen, *Journey of a Yellow Man No.11: Multiculturalism,* 1997. Yellow paint, rice, metal tub. The Substation, Singapore. Scans courtesy of Asia Art Archive.

Perhaps this can be more keenly seen in *Journey of a Yellow Man No.11: Multi-culturalism*, where Lee covers himself fully in yellow paint and presents a paper ventilating his grievances about prevailing conservatisms in Singaporean art that overrepresented Chinese painting, calligraphy and watercolour at the expense of more experimental forms, such as installation and performance[41]. Lee formed the letters C(hinese), M(alay), I(ndian), and O(thers)[42] out of rice on the ground, then jumbled it up. He then stripped to his briefs to wash the yellow off in a galvanised metal tub, following which he put on a Malay sarong and bottled the yellow bath water into plastic containers, giving them away to the audience, and proclaiming, "Now I am a water colourist too!"[43]

These traditional mediums in contention were likely founded on the Nanyang art style, associated with émigré Chinese artists working in British Malaya in the 50s, prior to colonial independence, which comprised an 'experimental and syncretic approach to pictorial representation,'[44] taking on Post-Impressionist and Fauvist art styles, while using Chinese ink, brush, and compositional techniques, an East-meets-West ideal. This must not be confused with the overarching term used to describe the same diaspora. The Nanyang artists were undeniably Nanyang diaspora, but this style was predominant in the 50s and 60s, when the Nanyang region was still fraught with British colonial tension and post-war anxiety. Nanyang-style artists[45] were heavily invested in their cultural identity as 'ethnically Chinese sojourners, frequently used to substantiate the originality of the Nanyang Style.'[46] Especially venerated in

[41] Roots.gov, 'Journey of A Yellow Man No.11: Multi-Culturalism', accessed 10 April 2023, https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1140245.

[42] C, M, I, O stands for Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others, in direct reference to the state's dominant racial organising framework.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Yvonne Low, 'Nanyang Style', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781135000356-REM874-1.n

[45] Key proponents of this style included artists such as Chen Chong Swee, Georgette Chen, Liu Kang, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng and Lim Hak Tai. They were all involved and associated with the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), founded by Lim Hak Tai.

[46] Low, 'Nanyang Style'.

state institutions following independence, their paintings were found on banknotes, located in national archives, galleries, and even part of the national curriculum in the education system. *Drying Salted Fish* (see Fig. 7) deliberately portrays its subjects as a 'calm … yet industrious and useful community,'[47] blending Chinese ink with European watercolours on linen cloth rather than on Xuan paper (Chinese rice paper), and composing a horizontal scroll format that called to traditional Chinese painting with a vertical signature and seal stamp, yet doing away with the typified flattened perspectives, instead focusing on salient subjects within the scene, which was very much a European methodology to figurative painting.

Figure 7. Cheong Soo Pieng, *Drying Salted Fish*, 1978, Chinese ink and watercolour on cloth, 70 x 103 cm. National Gallery, Singapore.

[47] Usha Chandradas, 'The Majulah Series: The Art of Singapore Money', *Plural Art Mag*, 26 August 2016, https://pluralartmag.com/2016/08/26/the-majulah-series-the-art-of-singapore-money/.

State interests in Nanyang-style art was engaged in a discourse revealing a 'love the art, but hate the system [communism in China] that produced it'[48] approach, since newly independent Singapore of the early 60s' thought it was imprudent to 'pass to the future generation the 'bag and baggage' tradition of the migrants,' and hence found the most fitting compromise amidst an immediate post-colonial climate to be to marry both 'East' and 'West' in national imaginaries. Hence, circling back to *Yellow Man,* Lee complicates these state racial and foreign policies by inserting his own racialised body and autonomy into it, simultaneously questioning hegemonic state narratives and counter-memorialising this intersection, poking fun at state-sanctioned, politically benign forms of art (I am a water-colourist!) while also complying with these OB markers. Unlike Josef Ng, who was nationally scorned and condemned, Lee eventually was awarded his own Cultural Medallion[49] in 2005, the same conferred to Georgette Chen, a Nanyang-style artist, in 1982.

I am, however, not asserting that *Yellow Man*, being a counter-memorial tool for Lee to perform memory work about the Nanyang diaspora, wields more value in considering diasporic memory because even the state acknowledges his eminence. This chapter is about the imagistic quality of memory, which 'does not operate with the language of logic,' but is visual, embodied, and discontinuous. Memory defies stability because it is not meant to be stable. This is echoed in Lee's push-and-pull between state narratives and his own; this is a relationship fraught with temporal tension. Both the state and Lee are concerned with the memorial qualities of identity, but the state exercises it through oppression, while *Yellow Man* complicates this very oppression.

[48] Michael Sullivan, *Studies in the Art of China and South-East Asia* (London: Pindar Press, 1991).

[49] The Cultural Medallion is Singapore's most prestigious award given to people who have had significant influence on art in the country.

Annette Kuhn affirms this, further explaining:

> Events narrated or portrayed in memory texts often telescope or merge into one another in the telling … memory text is typically a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, 'snapshots', flashes.[50]

Returning to *The Body as Archive*: meant to be a retrospective, the work encapsulates the discontinuous and illogical nature of memory through the haphazard, chaotic formations of artist statements and photographs of Lee's *Yellow Man* of 20 years. The ice melting is a counter-memory, a counter-monument; it is theatrical because it has an audience, and happens immediately, a happening suspended in its own time but also calling to other times.

The point here is that the diaspora, in spite of its years, never fails to implicate itself in its untethered past, where archives call to memory and memories call to their own memories. These unceasing entanglements prove a diasporic temporality founded plainly on memory, an impulse that forever *counters* itself. As Derrida confesses:

> I struggle against this loss, the loss of memory.[51]

[50] Annette Kuhn, 'A Journey Through Memory', in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. Susannah Radstone (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2000), 179–96.

[51] 'Dialanguages', in *Points...*, by Jacques Derrida (Stanford University Press, 1995), 132–55, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503622425-009.

On the edge of a border

I'm the poet of forgotten songs

find me between a rock and

a star

you don't need to go too

far

Entry from Lee Wen's journal, 2009.[52]

This chapter engages with a persistent trauma of dislocation that 'engenders a politics and aesthetics of placelessness,'[53] and as such, a 'metaphorical homelessness,' in which a migrant lives between an 'adopted home' and an 'ancestral home,' or what was once home. This involves aspirations of longing for and emotions of belonging to a place against a 'simultaneous desire to remain distant from it.'

The placelessness of being in an adopted home and an ancestral home, yet not quite fully present in either immediacies, entails/means being *on the edge of a border*, of a simultaneous spatial collapse teetering between one or the other. The position of the threshold, of being almost, is a constant vibrational, indeterminate force vastly oscillating between two points of longing. The diaspora stands as a 'liminal space of recollection and reimagination'[54] in which

[52] Adele Tan, *The Artist Speaks: Lee Wen*, ed. Bruce Quek (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2020).

[53] Ezenwa E Olumba, 'The Homeless Mind in a Mobile World: An Autoethnographic Approach on Cognitive Immobility in International Migration', *Culture & Psychology*, 27 June 2022, 1354067X221111456, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X221111456.

[54] Zhou Hau Liew, 'The Spectral Nanyang: Recollection, Nation, And The Genealogy Of Chineseness' (Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations., University of Pennsylvania, 2017), https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/3054.

evocations of aesthetic expression by diaspora are done through a 'framework of spectrality,'[55] or a framework of memory.

Clearly, generational diaspora does not come from a point of origin that demarcates a spatial certainty. *The time is out of joint* is a statement of precarity; the liminal space is one in which the population sits external to a time-space in which they do not fully embody yet occupy. The fear of displacement and being possibly displaced (displaceable) produces an 'annihilation anxiety,'[56] a chronic insecurity, or a yearning to retain cultural survival. I refer to Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, in which he elaborates:

> All national rootedness, for example, is rooted first of all in the memory or the anxiety of a displaced—or displaceable—population. [57]

As Nanyang 'nationhood' supposes an initial memory of movement, this not only frames a post-colonial imperative of the Nanyang region, but also means that the diaspora is perpetually inclined to turn to memory (as elaborated in Chapter 1) to ground any anxieties of displacement.

This anxiety can also be recontextualised within psychotherapeutic studies towards trauma. The word 'link'[58] is often used as a connective term between trauma and patient, which in this case would be anxiety and diaspora. Trauma manifests in *a* present, much like how memory does. Linkages, as elaborated by Davoine and Gaudillière, may require such an 'immediacy'[59] (present) brought about by cause-effect models of problem-solving, indicating that 'madness'

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Nathan M.L. To, 'The Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Through Distributed, Mediated Visions of Memory in 2nd Generation Canadian Chinese Experience' (London, United Kingdom, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014).

[57] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, vol. 7 (Routledge, 1994), 102-103.

[58] Valerie Walkerdine and Luis Jimenez, *Gender, Work and Community After De-Industrialisation*, 2012.

[59] Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, *History beyond Trauma*, History beyond Trauma. (New York, NY, US: Other Press, 2004), 168.

(trauma/anxiety) is a crisis that needs to be neutralised with a solution. They emphasise that rather than attempting to solve 'madness,' it would be better to conceive of all crises of 'madness' as beginnings (memories),[60] where the patient recovers the urgency of the said crisis and 'formulate[s] the intersection and coordinates of histories.'[61] In other words, anxiety can only be superficially resolved if conceived in the present; contending with anxiety requires situating the diaspora in memory, which is a reconstruction of the past.

The presence of anxiety hence means that the diaspora settles itself in its inherent unsettledness, constantly oscillating between past and present. I will make clear, however, that while historiological productions of diasporic memory do often stem from annihilation anxiety (cf. Samets)[62], the Nanyang constituted (and still do) a major economic influence in Southeast Asia, who were 'dominant in both wholesale and retail … intra-regional and hinterland transactions.'[63] The clear socio-economic ubiquity of the Chinese in commercial Southeast Asia throughout colonial times meant that diasporic anxiety in the Nanyang region was not governed by a fear of erasure; rather, it was guided by a primacy of being *from* but not *of*. Where the formation of a diaspora is a gradual process, when do migrants depart from a Chinese past, and how would they grapple with this?

Lee beckons to such a loss, among which is one of language:[64]

> … I use English, being a child of the post-colonial country of Singapore. My father was an author who wrote in Chinese… they said, '哦，这个是鲁白也的

[60] Ibid, 169.
[61] Ibid, 201.
[62] Alexandra T. Samets, 'Jewish Annihilation Anxiety : Diasporic Legacies of Trauma', 2015.
[63] KWEE HUI KIAN, 'Chinese Economic Dominance in Southeast Asia: A 'Longue Duree' Perspective', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 1 (2013): 5–34.
[64] Tan, Adele, *The Artist Speaks: Lee Wen*, ed. Quek, Bruce (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2020).

> 孩子啊，我看他没有这么厉害，没有他爸爸那么厉害。 (This is Lu Bai Ye's child? I think he's not as capable as his father),' and I felt so ashamed.[65]

The tension between shame and discomfort associated with unfamiliarity towards the Chinese language is held against a desire to assimilate into Southeast Asia, as also elaborated by Ien Ang in *On Not Speaking Chinese:*

> … there is also … a certain desire to assimilate, a longing for fitting in rather than standing out, even though this desire is often at the same time contradicted by an incapability or refusal to adjust and adapt.[66]

In an adjacent vein, Olumba coins 'cognitive immobility' as a phenomenon of the body travelling ahead of the mind in retrospect.[67] I employ his definition of cognitive immobility as mental entrapment, i.e. psychological effort(s) to 'relive past episodes in places one lived or visited in the past to reclaim what one may be missing or left behind,' suggesting that they are 'cognitively immobilised.'[68] Again, we see here that the migrant oscillates between now and then, a desperation to be present in a past time, or drawing the past into the present.

Ching-Sue Kuik also observes that China's colonial perpetrations of a 'primordial Chineseness'[69] cannot help but appropriate European colonial logic as a mechanic available to them in construing the Nanyang as a primarily Chinese frontier. In the late Qing and Republican era, the mainland narrative configured Huaqiao as 'successful colonialists or emblematic

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[65] The Artling Team, 'Interview with Lee Wen', The Artling, 13 May 2014, https://theartling.com/en/artzine/interview-lee-wen-performance-artist/.

[66] Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*.

[67] Olumba, 'The Homeless Mind in a Mobile World'.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ching-Sue Kuik, 'Un/Becoming Chinese: Huaqiao, the Non-Perishable Sojourner Reinvented, and Alterity of Chineseness' (Doctor of Philosophy, University of Washington, 2013), https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/23534/Kuik_washington_0250E_12080.pdf.

founder figures of colonial prototype in the constructions and articulations of Chineseness.'[70] I do not mean to undermine the suggestions that this strand of information gives in its colonial context, especially when it can feed into dangerous conceptions of Chinese privilege in the Nanyang region and its persisting economic dominance. Rather, I am drawing attention here to a form of direct association that stands in direct opposition to literature from diasporic authors, such as Eileen Chang (张爱玲), that highlighted concerns of Huaqiao's incongruous identity, 'at odds with an 'authentic' zhongguo [Mainland Chinese] identity.'[71] An excerpt from *Love in a Fallen City* expresses an example of self-performance and re-enactment of their own Chineseness, which inadvertently proves the opposite:

> 'It's always 'they, them, those huaqiao!' she said. 'Don't call me 'them'! They have the bad habits of the Chinese (zhōngguórén; 中國人) and the bad habits of foreigners (waìguórén; 外國人) as well. From the foreigners they learn to be afraid of getting fat, won't eat this, won't eat that, always taking purgatives but can't stop eating sweets. But then—go ahead, just ask her! If you ask her why she's eating this, she'll say she's had a little cough recently, and candied walnuts are good for a cough.'
>
> 'That really is the old Chinese way,' Zhenbao said with a smile.[72]

The colonial construction of the Huaqiao as alien and liminal, of which they have 'bad habits' of both the Chinese and foreigners, but also a palpable desperation in being perceived as truly Chinese in behaviour and mannerism, puts forward this same anxiety. Of being Huaqiao, being

[70] Ibid, 3.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ailing Zhang, *Love in a Fallen City*, trans. Karen Kingsbury (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), 268.

semantically *Overseas*, a political border demarcates being transnational and diasporic, foregrounding a nascent diasporic trajectory and 'destiny.'[73] Ironically, when the character asserts her identity, adamant on not being othered, she exacerbates this boundary.

The overarching argument here, beyond losing language and belonging, is one of being in limbo, tethered to a conception of Chineseness that demands cultural identification through ancestry. 50 years later, Lee Wen performs said ancestry by using the colour yellow:

> Yellow is… the colour of the river that runs in the old country. It is the spirit of nobility …[74]

Journey of a Yellow Man's yellow rhetoric seems to be representational. The river is the 黄河 (huáng hé), or the Yellow River; yellow is an imperial colour in ancient China, and the Yellow River is often said to be the birthplace of Chinese civilisation. But perhaps most important is the use of 'old country,' a tart acknowledgement that yellow is not just the colour of his painted skin but also 'the' country, a specific space of prior rootedness, and to Qing-era, pre-revolutionary China.

The image below depicts Lee performing his 15th edition of *Yellow Man* that took place in Pengshan, China, titled *Touching China*, where, in his familiar lemon yellow persona, he walks to and fro his hotel and the street. His own body mediates a tension between his discrete diasporahood; he is in China, where his ancestry lies, and yet where he stands comically yellow among everyone else.

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[73] WANG GUNGWU, 'The Question of the 'Overseas Chinese'', *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1976, 101–10.

[74] Wen Lee, *Journey of a Yellow Man No.5: Index to Freedoms*, 10 October 1994, artist statement for 4th Asian Art Show, 10 October 1994, Fukuoka Art Museum.

Figure 8. Lee Wen, *Journey of a Yellow Man No.15: Touching China*, 2001. Pengshan, China. Image courtesy of Lee Wen's estate and Asia Art Archive.

Lee projects this ancestry by experiencing this performance affectiively, which, being a simultaneously psychological and physical experience, poises 'between the explicit and the implicit, external and internal … [and] familiar and alien… the body itself can act as a threshold between the self and the material world.'[75] Additionally, Rick Foot describes improvised performance as a form that 'creates itself.'[76] This means that the *Yellow Man* is symbolic of the diaspora because it is transient and affective; the state of *Yellow Man* is a state on the threshold.

The threshold delimits two contiguous spaces on each side and implicitly opposes them to one another. Arguably, this applies to all that has been mentioned within this chapter: adopted home/ancestral home, mother tongue/foreign language, mind/body, body/space. The threshold is also a space that 'enables passage between these two,' where there is then 'no other possible choice left to the poet but to be in constant transit through these liminal spaces, shunning any fixed identification, and to write his verses in-between the two sides of a threshold.' [77] These

[75] Subha Mukherji, 'Introduction', in *Thinking on Thresholds*, ed. Subha Mukherji, The Poetics of Transitive Spaces (Anthem Press, 2011), xix, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1gxp855.6.

[76] Rick Foot, 'THRESHOLDS IN IMPROVISATION':, in *Thinking on Thresholds*, ed. Subha Mukherji, The Poetics of Transitive Spaces (Anthem Press, 2011), 187, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1gxp855.19.

[77]

two points reflect each other in a perpetual back-and-forth. Circling back to Derrida, the specular then 'becomes the spectral' at the *threshold* of this 'objectifying naturalisation.'[78] Both the oppositional forces that sit across a threshold are spatial, temporal constructions, malleable to the symmetrical gives and takes of Nanyang counter-memory, for if the diaspora forgets how to speak Chinese, it is replaced with English, Malay, or another language; if the diaspora is present in the adopted home, they will continuously ponder over their ancestral one; if the *Yellow Man* looks outside of himself to observe his yellowness from afar, he does not gain access to his yellowness from within (in that precise temporal space). The diaspora, between its two opposing bodies, exists as a spectre, which 'seeks a body,'[79] and as such, its settledness is in its liminality.

I want to make clear that the threshold is strictly not a third, separate space; not even a transitory one. It is never static, and always considers the other side while being in one. Seemingly, this is against Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space in *The Location of Culture*, requires that 'these two places be mobilised in the passage through a Third Space, which cannot 'in itself' be conscious,'[80] and prove that even the 'same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew.'[81] The postcolonial Third Space framework primarily examines how cultural identities are formed in the space between two dominant cultures, a 'hybrid space,'[82] a liminal zone where cultures merge and where a new cultural identity emerges. Bhabha sees this as a place from where one might go beyond the contained grid of fixed identities and binary oppositions, and hence I further expand this an unstable space. Hence, *Third Space* does not consider itself a literal third space, as it considers cultural hybridity in a

Rosita D'Amora, 'WRITING THROUGH OSMOTIC BORDERS':, in *Thinking on Thresholds*, ed. Subha Mukherji, The Poetics of Transitive Spaces (Anthem Press, 2011), 103, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1gxp855.13.

[78] Derrida, *Specters of Marx,* 196.

[79] Liew, 'The Spectral Nanyang,' 181.

[80] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), 36.

[81] Ibid, 37.

[82] Ibid.

way similar to Nanyang conceptions of being in between China and elsewhere, in that it is never resolved, and is non-hierarchical, even in the condition of a persistent coloniality. The Third Space, then, is not a distinct space, but rather a formless, unstable overlap in between and occupying the gap between equality and difference, hopeful about the subversive potential of this liminal space. I tie this back to the first chapter's conceptions of memory, which I have defined as a sort of undecided tether to the past through state oppression and counter-memory; diasporic memory is such a spatio-temporality (hybrid, threshold, Third Space, liminal).

> Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out… her intervention is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider. She is this Inappropriate Other/Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at. [83]

The Other and the Same, in Min-Ha Trinh's description, also correlate with Bhabha's Third Space theories of insider/outsider, obfuscating often hierarchical boundaries of colonised/coloniser, overseas/local. *Yellow Man* analogises this point: Lee and his yellow persona embody each other, and in turn it is impossible to distinguish the *Yellow Man* from his site of performance, as the yellow figure exists in relation to his constantly changing site(s). More amusingly is how *Yellow Man* was rendered when No. 15 (Fig. 3) was performed in Pengshan, where it was, contrary to his original purposes of contesting his Chineseness, read

[83] T. Minh-Ha Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 74.

to the Chinese public as 'advocating Chinese pride.'[84] Lee, however, countered this himself: "There is such a thing as diasporas and it does make a difference to one's identity,"[85] further proving *Yellow Man* is always in flux and resists definition. The Hua (华) in Huaqiao denotes a Chineseness that is neither national nor political, but something far more intangible, a Chinese dislocated and extended beyond its languages and cultures into its diaspora. The diaspora, like the *Yellow Man*, is a construction, a time, left to be repeatedly recontextualised.

[84] Alice Ming, 'Lee Wen: Performing Yellow', *Afterall*, no. 46 (July 2018), https://www.afterall.org/article/lee.

[85] Ibid.

Coming back out, around, and over

> *There seems to be repetition within the context of rituals… that [repetition] references our being in time and becomes [an] image or metaphor of or for time within eternity…*
>
> Excerpt from *Republic of Daydreams*, Lee Wen, 2007[86]

Rituals, first and foremost, are repetitive. In the same way the diaspora constantly wavers in the in-betweens, constantly negotiating with its memory, rituals are systematic performances that have prescribed motives and gestures that move towards these motives. This chapter will draw a full circle in diasporic temporality, manifesting its physicality through the diaspora's memories and sites, into the realm of practice. Through ritual, I arrive at another layer of understanding of diaspora space-time that is material in nature, fulfilled through body, memory, and space that *suspends* time; a time that is still out of joint.

Ritual performance is repetitive practice that is 'highly material,' and is fulfilled through the bodily movements of a performer, the physical space in which the ritual is conducted, and the objects[87] through which the rituals are enacted. Stephan Feuchtwang defines ritual as 'repeated and standardised communicative action … not simply through signs but also through symbols,'[88] a form of repeated action that is not only functional or technical, but also

[86] Wen Lee, *The Republic of Daydreams* (Singapore: SooBin Int'l, 2008).

[87] Miranda K. Stockett, 'PERFORMING POWER: Identity, Ritual, and Materiality in a Late Classic Southeast Mesoamerican Crafting Community', *Ancient Mesoamerica* 18, no. 1 (2007): 91–105.

[88] Stephan Feuchtwang, 'Ritual and Memory', in *Memory*, ed. SUSANNAH RADSTONE and BILL SCHWARZ, Histories, Theories, Debates (Fordham University Press, 2010), 281–98, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.23.

aesthetic,[89] with stylised gestures as part of the communicative code. Ritual, hence, functions on systemic repetition within communities, where people part of such communities 'remember them, or represent them to themselves,' feeding into them their 'particular experiences.'[90] Within a structural framework distinct from everyday routine, such an aesthetic of repeated, purposeful action is prescriptive, intentional and gestural. In *The Ritual Body,* Catherine Bell states that rituals 'forge an experience of redemptive harmony'[91] creating karmic balance between action and reward. Rituals, being purposeful, mean that a gesture is conceived as an exchange, in expectation for something to be fulfilled. Hence, I infer that the ritual is a memorial space; any performed gesture (or action) is reminiscent of a past iteration while also indicating a future imbursement.

Lee's imaginings of *Journey of a Yellow Man* collide with Victor Turner's studies on ritual drama, which describe the ritual space as liminal and anti-structural.[92] Situated in indeterminate space, ritual is typically recalled in and triggered by a present predicament, then executed through gestures, forming a vehicle for memory. It is typified as a rite of passage; a diaspora, who finds itself in an imagined space, moves constantly from one state to another.

In other words, ritual is memory work that forms on the threshold, making itself apparent through gestures. Fundamentally, gestures are motor actions.[93] They are the body's movements in time, which communicate, or attempt to communicate (a gesture that resists communication

[89] Edmund Leach, 'Ritual', in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968).

[90] Feuchtwang, 'Ritual and Memory'.

[91] Catherine Bell, 'The Ritual Body and The Dynamics of Ritual Power', *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4, no. 2 (1990): 299–313.

[92] Victor Turner, 'Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology', *The Kenyon Review* 1, no. 3 (1979): 80–93.

[93] Christopher Madan and Anthony Singhal, 'Using Actions to Enhance Memory: Effects of Enactment, Gestures, and Exercise on Human Memory', *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (2012), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00507.

also communicates). Ritual gestures thus refer to a bodily movement that is directed at a purpose.

I propose that *Journey of a Yellow Man* is, among many things, a series built upon ritual. As we have established by far, Lee composes his performances of rudimentary gestures, the simplest – walking. The way the *Yellow Man* moves, or *journeys* through time, is most fulfilled by walking; the *Yellow Man*'s intention is in his *journey*.

Chan Li Shan's memoir of Lee Wen reveals a consciously child-like methodology used in approaching gestures within his performances:

> … Lee Wen told himself that he was learning how to walk. He was stepping, stepping, stepping, stepping. Then lifting, lifting, lifting, lifting… one step at a time. In the entire twenty[-]four hours, from sunrise to sunset, he took a break only twice … The thing is to keep on breathing. [Be] conscious of your breath, conscious of your movement…

This process echoes Vipassana meditation practices, wherein walking-meditation, based in Theravada Buddhist ritual, is considered a 'formative activity.'[94] Because walking is one of the most banal acts of the human condition, it beckons the 'rediscovery of a natural rhythm for breathing, a sharper perception of things.'[95] Walking shifts the body's consciousness through moving it from place to place, a spiritual exercise that invites a spatial reflection. Since ritual is a repetitive practice grounded in the materiality (of objects) and the performer's bodily movements,~~,~~ the performed gestures function as an intermediary, connecting the body to its

[94] Gilson Motta and Tania Alice, 'Performance Art as Spiritual Practice', *Performance and Mindfulness* 2, no. 1 (21 January 2019), https://doi.org/10.5920/pam.560.

[95] Ibid.

sites. Walking is therefore a ritual practice that is an instrument to the *Journey*, an exchange through which the *Yellow Man* traces diasporic memory, disrupts diasporic time.

Lee conceptualises the bulk of *Yellow Man* happenings in public spaces, namely in *Journey of a Yellow Man No. 2: The Fire and the Sun* (1993, Karnakatha, India), *No. 5: Index to Freedom* (1994, Fukuoka, Japan), *No. 6: History and Self* (1995, Tokyo, Japan), *No. 9: Trees Resurrection* (1997, Chiapa de Corzo, Mexico), *No. 13: Fragmented Bodies/Shifting Ground* (1999, Brisbane, Australia), *No. 15: Touching China* (2001, Sichuan, China)[96], and *Strange Fruit* (2003, Singapore), all of which are primarily comprised of the bright lemon-yellow man walking through public sites.

Figure 9. Lee Wen, *Journey of a Yellow Man No.13: Fragmented Bodies/Shifting Ground,* 1999. Brisbane, Australia. Image courtesy of Queensland Art Gallery. Scans by Asia Art Archive.

[96] See Fig 8, page 29.

Francesco Careri provides an account of walking as an aesthetic form, as also a mechanism of architecture, that imposes a system of order onto a space, where walking is infrastructural, and the 'walking pedestrian is as urban as the buildings they navigate.'[97] The yellow body is therefore a vessel for the sites he inhabits: the urban landscapes, the rice paddy fields, in small rooms, walking in circles, heightening a walking-consciousness. The significance of this lies not in the site or the body, but in the unconscious dimensions of such a mobile experience where its objective is not in the destination, but in the journey. One might also note the similarity in language used to delineate walking in the urban space to that of Buddhist meditative rites: in both cases, the body does not possess agency; it is a carrier that holds potential.

In this context, I introduce the concept of the self, or rather the no-self (無我, wú wǒ, literally meaning no me/self), also known as Anātman in Sanskrit, which is one of the most foundational doctrines in Buddhist teachings. It realises that 'nothing has an essence … the existence of each thing is dependent on the existence of other things … as emptiness.'[98] This is founded on a heavy reliance on impermanence, and perpetual change; there is no self if one perpetually changes, volatile to everything around them.

Perhaps this makes it easier to comprehend how identity slips in and out of states while undergoing consistent walking movement. Earlier, ritual was defined as 'repetitive practices,' and where this is the case, the body achieves equilibrium through being desensitised to such a repetitive practice. This fulfils three conditions that Vipassana meditation aims for: (1) to

[97] Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Ames, IA: Culicidae Architectural Press, 2017).

[98] R. King, *Early Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism: The Mahayana Context of the Gaudapadiya-Karika* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

remove or to lack an essence, (2) impermanence, and (3) interdependence on other individuals and things.[99]

(2) and (3) in this context mean that because (diasporic) time is unstable, nothing is absolutely permanent, or truly invariable; everything is dependent on its surrounding matter, given that everything exists in space-time. The concept of an 'essence' is rooted in Western philosophy: Aristotle theorises that it is 'what makes the thing be what it is,' to 'be known and so defined accordingly.'[100] The ipseity of the self is constituted here. The closest vocabulary Buddhist thought has gotten to an idea of 'essence' is through Ātman, with a cross-definition between self and breath, where the prefix 'An-' denotes no-self/breath. Hence, Anātman does not refer to no-self as in implying the destruction of self, or eroding of it, especially if such a self is not theorised into being in the first place. Rather, it encourages an ethical, compassionate freedom, where if one was able to accept this volatility, emptiness literally meant freedom from the constraints of bodily wants and needs. Buddhism, as a thought system, involves a 'constant attention… it must be experienced, felt, reflected upon, questioned.'[101]

Because of the separation of ritual from the everyday, it is a corporeal experience, both for the ritual performer and the site (the site here also considers the audience). This occurs regardless of how insignificant the gesture is, since ritual is set aside from habit. As such, ritual creates memory; when it is repeated, it is reinforced, and 'endures change... performers of ritual know they are committing themselves to prescribed action.'[102] The change here that Feuchtwang refers to is what I consider the linear time of an existing space. When the *Yellow Man* walks in

[99] John Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*, 3rd ed, Religious Life in History (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2007).

[100] Frank A. Lewis, 'What Is Aristotle's Theory of Essence?', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplementary Volume* 10 (1984): 89–131, https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1984.10715873.

[101] Motta and Alice, 'Performance Art as Spiritual Practice'.

[102] Feuchtwang, 'Ritual and Memory'.

an already existing space, he embodies it, thereby disrupting it. These considerations also imply a moral geography of the space, 'that certain people, things and practices belong in certain spaces, places and landscapes and not in others.'[103] Thus, the walking-ritual becomes a diasporic claim on public space, a move to mark out, and occupy with the materiality of the ritual, to bring memory into physicality, creating new spatial relationships with the site. The walking creates a space-time distinct from the standardised, linear time; what could be a better enactment, or a demonstration, of the diasporic condition?

Circling back to chapter 2, where I first elaborated on thresholds, Byung-Chul Han explains further:

> The threshold is a transition to the unknown. Beyond the threshold, a completely different state of being begins … whoever crosses the boundary subjects themselves to a transformation.

The ritual time-space is thus constructed as a threshold, specifically between the everyday typicalities of the public space and the jarring insertion of the performing body. The *journeying* of the *Yellow Man* through the threshold evokes an imperative of public art[104] which complicates the art(ist) and environment; Miwon Kwon recognises this phenomenon:

> … if we identify 'the work' as the dialogue and collaboration between an artist and a community group, we conjure a picture of the community nonetheless …

In other words, when the *Yellow Man* enters this ritual time-space (threshold), he alters both his own memory, which had been disparate to the public site prior to his entering, as well as

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[103] Timothy Cresswell, 'Moral Geographies', in *Cultural Geography; A Critical Geography of Key Ideas*, ed. David Atkinson et al. (I.B. Tauris, 2005), 128–34.

[104] Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002).

the public site's memory. This is a spatio-temporal fusion, made even more material by the repetition of the gesture. The contingencies of the here and now are admitted through the *Yellow Man*, who is only there because he *journeys*; the diaspora never stops migrating.

Figure 10. Lee Wen, *Journey of a Yellow Man No.13, Fragmented Bodies/Shifting Ground,* 1999. Brisbane, Australia. Image courtesy of Queensland Art Gallery and Asia Art Archive.

Conclusion

> *Time is simply an imperfect way in which the eternal patterns of the world present themselves. It is always an ancillary time premised on alogically prior movement.*[105]
>
> Henry Somers-Hall, 2011[106]

The word *temporalities* which I have used in the title reveals an intrinsic correlation to time; a dictionary search reveals that such a time is earthly, temporary, temporal.[107] Temporality has all the strands of past, present and future woven, tangled; the *Yellow Man* is a mediation of what he was and what he is. He stands against a clinamen confused by the strangeness of his arrival, for he is a present without a before or an after, time beyond understanding.

Tempered by time and space, I embarked on *Journey of a Yellow Man* to elucidate diasporic consciousness because substantially, *Yellow Man* is me. I am still unsure if it is the bright yellow aesthetic that reminds myself of all the yellowness that I inherit and disinherit, or the ingenuous way *Yellow Man* is both politically perceptive yet utterly ignorant all at once. There is a strange familiarity in being both offspring of similar but different temporalities. Being diaspora means being both left adrift on an ocean of everything but also being anchored to nothing, constitutive of a headlong movement that carries the past into the present.

The memory of the diaspora lives in that liminality. The diasporic condition is that he flows continually, still, towards the future, but this is not a process of reconciliation or pacification; it is of repetition. To the diaspora, the past is not dead, because the past is indefinite, and

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[105] Henry Somers-Hall, 'Time Out of Joint: Hamlet and the Pure Form of Time', *Deleuze Studies* 5 (2011): 56–76.

[106] Wen Lee, *The Republic of Daydreams* (Singapore: SooBin Int'l, 2008).

[107] Merriam-Webster, 'Temporality' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023).

therefore this renders a potential to their past, a constant renewal, a threshold within all that can be before and after. Passage in extreme direction of any space leaves traces of the others. The diaspora has no choice but to be in constant movement in the liminal, in the two sides of the threshold. He makes himself part of his present by repeating what he has always known, convoluting his memory into his present. The diaspora's very presence, therefore, is repetitive. Perhaps, then, the reason why diasporic memory can materialise in ritual gesture is because rituals occur unceasingly as long as the diaspora exists. The ritual gesture is experiential, much like being in the thresholds of time and space, rendering its memory.

The *Yellow Man* has long since Lee Wen's passing been memorialised as a man, not very tall[108], with thin legs, ribcage visible, with strong hands and long fingers, no cellulite, small in stature, I noticed, serendipitously, but also not so serendipitously, that my friends from Singapore and Malaysia who too moved to England had all been writing disparately, yet fervently, about home customs, rituals, and memory, spilling over into a game of Mahjong over Chinese New Year, away from a tropical 'home,' a group of Chinese-Singaporeans and Malaysians who only could determine their own spatio-temporalities through going back in time. We gleefully lament after, over texts: "haha the diaspora urge to write about memory!" knowing that to be part of a diasporic parentage felt like speaking English was a more plausible facet of national identity than fruitlessly picking off a family tree that no longer traces the ones who have left. *Yellow Man* is an imagination; he is a construction, a *had been*, *was*, a *no longer*, but also, I hope to bring him forth into the present through this dissertation, for he is also a realisation of myself.

It is not only time that is 'out of joint,' but space in time, spacing.[109]

[108] Li Shan Chan, *Searching for Lee Wen* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2022).
[109] Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*.

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