

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

'Unable to think in my mother's tongue': immigrant daughters in Alice Pung's *Unpolished Gem* and Hsu-Ming Teo's *Behind the Moon* Alice Healy

All families invent their parents and children, give each of them a story, character, fate, and even a language.

(Edward Said)¹

Much has been written on the condition of migrancy in the modern world in both the experiences of diasporic communities and the concept of migrancy as symbolic of the movement of meaning across locations.² Although there is a proliferation of biographical and fictional writing on migrants' negotiation of the past and the future in a new country, little scholarly attention has been given in literary studies to the experiences of immigrant children represented in Australian literature. This paper proposes that migrancy should not only be conceptualised in terms of intellectual and geographical migration, but is also a condition that crosses generations – a continually shifting sense of belonging or alienation, a modification of language, a negotiation of place. As Richard Rodriguez suggests, immigrant children *intuit their contingent existence* – they understand that they must live in their own space, rewriting the text of their parents, and that the new 'text of self' carries traces of the old world, transformed by influences from outside the family. The tensions of a new society, national identities and global youth cultures, education, alternative sexualities, all influence the subjectivity of immigrant children. Rodriguez writes:

The immigrant child has the advantage or the burden of knowing what other children may more easily forget: a child, any child, necessarily lives in his own time, his own room. The child cannot have a life identical with that of his mother or father. For the immigrant child this knowledge is inescapable. And often very, very sad. ('Speak to us in Spanish,' the chorus of aunts used to say, 'in Spanish.' I was afraid to turn back.³

The immigrant child's room is described as an 'inescapable knowledge', an ontological condition which exists outside the perimeters of the space constructed by the child's parents. That room is inscribed not only with a parent's dream of a new life and a secure, peaceful home, but also a transplantation of social codes, languages and customs. Rodriguez's notion of an immigrant child's room as a psychic and subjective space is a useful metaphor because it proposes that migrancy is as much a state of moving from generation to generation as it is from homeland to new country. It is a

¹ Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (London: Granta, 2000) 3.

² See, for example: Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994); Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994); Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

³ Richard Rodriguez, 'An American Writer', *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford UP 1989), 11.

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kind of temporal space that must be negotiated and, as Homi Bhabha and Iain Chambers suggest, a 'third space' of transition and translation.⁴

The concept of generations in this paper is not fixed by a teleology defining certain age groups against a backdrop of key political and social changes.⁵ Instead, this study of generations is related to the way children 'translate' their parents' lives and construct unknown futures. In her influential work *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), Avtar Brah closely examines belonging, home and identity using the concept of 'diaspora space', with particular focus on South Asian communities in Britain since the post-war era. She is careful to assert the complex power relations that exist within and are defined by institutional categorisations of identity – from government immigration policy, to gender, class, linguistic and religious differences within 'intra-ethnic' relations. Her discussion of the 'disruptive' and 'transformative' conditions of intergenerational migrancy is useful in thinking through the various subjectivities of immigrant children, away from the public cliché of 'culture clashes' between generations:

Clearly, the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations, mediated as it is by memories of what was recently left behind, and by the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to reorientate, to form new social networks, and learns to negotiate new economic, political and cultural realities.⁶

Richard Rodriguez's notion of 'an immigrant child's room' as a separate social, linguistic and psychic space is appropriate to a discussion of intergenerational shifts in understanding. However, his own autobiography, *Hunger for Memory* (1981) has been criticised for its celebration of the 'public' power of American English over the more 'private' language of his childhood Spanish.⁷ In the six autobiographical essays which form Rodriguez's book, the author asserts a conscious detachment from his Mexican background and his parents' lives in favour of becoming an educated American with upward social mobility. Christos Tsiolkas's citation of Rodriguez in his novel, *Loaded*, is a telling epithet to a story of an immigrant son's negation of his family's pasts and futures through modes of abjection.⁸ In Tsiolkas's novel, Ari is a second generation Greek Australian man who chooses to detach himself from his Greek community, the suburban identities of Melbourne and any notion of 'belonging' via brief sexual encounters and drug culture. Both stories enact a deliberate rupture from parents' lived

⁴ Homi Bhabha, Iain Chambers and others offer a 'third space' in which polysemy and hybridity can move towards the centre without being situated in humanist binaries that invite closure. These postcolonial writers assert the need to recognise cultural difference and juxtaposition, and the social creativity of multiple identities.

⁵ Hugh Mackay, *Generations: Baby Boomers, Their Parents and Their Children* (Pan Macmillan, Sydney 1997). Mackay's studies of generations have become particularly influential in conceptualising generations against political, social and cultural change. However, the teleological nature of Mackay's concept of generations, a concept that measures age groups against the 'big events' and changes within thirty year periods, could be criticised for its failure to locate the experiences of immigrant children and those born in between periods and locations. Mackay's teleology fails to recognise difference.

⁶ Brah 190.

⁷ Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: the Education of Richard Rodriguez: an Autobiography* (Boston, Mass.: D.R. Godine, 1982).

⁸ Christos Tsiolkas, *Loaded* (Sydney: Vintage 1995) epigraph.

experiences even though both acknowledge that such disruptive subjectivities are underscored by the legacy of diasporic pasts.

In contrast to Rodriguez and Tsiolkas's stories of detachment, this paper explores 'the immigrant's story in translation' through the various instances of language spoken between parents and children. I analyse the experience of immigrant daughters in two 'Asian-Australian' texts – Alice Pung's recent memoir *Unpolished Gem* and Hsu-Ming Teo's *Behind the Moon*.⁹ I position these texts in the context of the reception of literature labelled 'Asian-Australian' in the market, exploring Hsu-Ming Teo's critique of such positioning.¹⁰ Centrally, the paper examines language in all the traditions and moral understandings that language applies, the transformative speech acts between parent and child, and the creative exploration of English as a spectre re-enforcing 'white nationalism'.

'Asian-Australian' Literature: 'Self-Orientalising' Speech Acts

Unpolished Gem and *Behind the Moon* differently explore 'Asian-Australian' identities (including Chinese-Cambodian, Chinese-Singaporean and Vietnamese), so it is useful to contextualise an analysis of these texts with some discussion of their position as novels about 'Asian-Australian' experience. Pung's memoir and Hsu-Ming Teo's *Behind the Moon* have been likened to other new generation novels, such as Hsu-Ming Teo's *Love and Vertigo* and Simone Lazaroo's *The World Waiting to be Made*. There is a strong sense in these books of the re-negotiation of 'Asian' identities in new generations, that new identities are formed for immigrant children through a concept of themselves as first and foremost Australians and a combination of cultural influences – Australian, American, European and 'Asian'. This is epitomised in Pung's descriptions of the children's social interaction via a hybrid form of English and Cantonese, as they 'littered their language with English terms, until every second word was in the foreign tongue' (UP 143).

In *Behind the Moon*, the desire to 'assimilate' effects the children as much as the parents, yet the story is set in an age when multiculturalism has overtaken official public policy. Teo critiques such 'white multiculturalist'¹¹ policies and shows how they are simply an extension of assimilation, to which the migrant families in this story adopt and 'cite' simultaneously. Bob Gibson's bitter observation of Justin Cheong's family provides an example of such citation:

⁹ Alice Pung, *Unpolished Gem* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2006). Hsu-Ming Teo, *Behind the Moon* (Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005). Further references to these works will be included in the text in parentheses, labeled UG and BTM respectively.

¹⁰ Hsu-Ming Teo, 'Phantom Limbs and Cultural Ventriloquism: Communicating Cultural Difference as a Novelist', *Journal of Australian Studies* 32:4 (December 2008): 521-529.

¹¹ Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Annandale: Pluto Press, 1998). Hage has argued that policies of multiculturalism are the domain of 'white multiculturalists' who play out 'White Nation' fantasies through a liberalist façade, while containing the non-European 'other' in a discourse that they feel they need to control. Stanley Fish has also critiqued the tendency for liberals to embrace customary and food rituals as public displays of cultural diversity, calling it 'boutique multiculturalism'. See further discussion in Tamara S. Wagner, 'Boutique Multiculturalism and the Consumption of Repulsion: Re-Disseminating Food Fictions in the Malaysian and Singaporean Diasporic Novels', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42:1 (2007).

The perfect Singaporean family who had made the perfect transition from pidgin-speaking migrants to perfectly acculturated Australianness. Perfectly multicultural, holding on to the best of the old Chinese ways – *sek farn*¹² my arse! – and good humouredly adopting the occasional ockerism, but always with that self-deprecating smile of awareness to show that they were quoting Australianness ironically; that they were cultured and sophisticated enough to play these multicultural games and win. (BTM 133)

It needs to be noted that such complex engagements with official ideas of assimilation and multiculturalism vary from story to story, but both Alice Pung and Hsu-Ming Teo show that the new generation practice this mode of *citation*, this preconceived ‘language’ of multiculturalism, in order to critique it. In her essay, ‘Phantom Limbs and cultural ventriloquism’, Hsu-Ming Teo identifies the ‘orientalising’ impulse of the market that designates ‘Asian-Australian literature’ into a homogenous category, suggesting that writing about a minority culture (that of the Chinese diaspora) is already marked by ‘a readership who already has a partially preconceived notion’ of ‘cultural authenticity’.¹³ When publishing her first novel *Love and Vertigo*, as an Australian writer with a Chinese-Malaysian father and a Chinese-Borneo-Singaporean mother, Teo was especially conscious of the novel’s categorisation in relation to Chinese-American women’s fiction and autobiography. She contends that her novel fitted neatly into a literature ‘featuring tragic mother-daughter melodramas’ and ‘lush descriptions of exotic food and customs’.¹⁴ Teo speaks of the peculiar ‘ventriloquism’ and ‘self-orientalising impulse’ of writing to such a preconceived script of ‘diasporic Asian experiences’, especially in a family with an intergenerational experience of English as central to their education. In her early childhood in Malaysia, Hsu-Ming and her siblings enjoyed the lived experience of multilingualism, from ‘Hokkien (my father’s dialect), Cantonese (our maids’ dialect), and ... Mandarin and Malay’.¹⁵ After migration to Sydney in 1977, Teo’s father believed strongly in assimilation; to shield his family from ‘excessive discrimination’, he adopted an ‘English-only policy at home’.¹⁶

The notion of English as a ‘form of power’ suggested in the figure of Hsu-Ming’s father is variously explored by immigrant and second generation writers. Following the removal of the White Australia Policy in the late 1960s, assimilation policy was withdrawn from official government policy but still underscored attitudes in Australian society under the more service-oriented policy of ‘integration’ of the early 1970s. Yet by 1977, preparations for recognising cultural diversity in the official policy of multiculturalism (issued by the Galbally Report on Migrant Programmes and Services in 1978) were dominant.¹⁷ Jupp suggests that ‘assimilation’ was understood in various ways in the post-war era, from the emphasis on assimilation by ‘appearance’ to assimilation by ‘acculturation’, ‘the most significant example being a

¹² In the novel’s glossary, *sek farn* is defined as a ‘Cantonese invitation to dine, literally meaning eat rice’ (BTM 367).

¹³ Teo, ‘Phantom Limbs’ 524.

¹⁴ Teo, ‘Phantom Limbs’ 524.

¹⁵ Teo, ‘Phantom Limbs’ 522.

¹⁶ Teo, ‘Phantom Limbs’ 522.

¹⁷ Janis Wilton, ‘A White Australia?’, *Making Australian History: Perspectives on the Past since 1788* ed. Deborah Gare and David Ritter (South Melbourne: Thomson, 2008) 275.

shift to the use of English'.¹⁸ Although assimilation policy was officially over by 1972 and multilingualism was firmly established by 1976,¹⁹ many second generation Australians (from various diasporic communities) had lost their attachment to their family's past and the nuances of family histories, languages and customary practices. This effectively rendered it necessary for immigrant children to live 'in-between' societies and translate across many cultural identities.

Hsu-Ming Teo grew up reading the novels of the English canon and, despite her family carrying through some of the customary habits of Chinese culture in 'notions of filial piety, reverence for education, and customs loosened from their original cultural meanings', her 'cultural imaginary was largely British-Australian'.²⁰ After her PhD in History was completed, Teo visited relatives in Singapore to research on her family's various histories and learn more of the meaning behind certain only superficially understood rituals. However, developing a more comprehensive knowledge of her family's heritage did not lead to a belief in her own cultural authenticity. Instead, Teo describes the process as an 'act of translation' across *representations* of culture:

and translations, as Doris Bachmann-Medick has observed, 'are not based on "original" cultures, for these have always already been represented and "translated" ... Every act of translation is an act of interpretation across time and space, an act of creative construction because no two translations are ever the same. ... In the act of representation, I translate and interpret and construct, but perhaps what I conjure is a mirage that only seems real, seems authentic, seems to be something graspable, something knowable about another culture that I have exoticised.'²¹

It is this affective interplay between languages integrally tied to the parent-child relationship and the child's shifting identity that is played out in various ways in the two texts examined here. Alice Pung's *Unpolished Gem* is a memoir of growing up in Melbourne's suburb of Footscray as daughter of Chinese-Cambodian parents, survivors of the human injustices of the Pol Pot years. She is a second generation Chinese-Australian, deeply respectful of her parents' and grandparents' stories. Yet *Unpolished Gem* is a life story very much about a daughter's struggles to abide by filial duty while negotiating the 'new' place carved out by her parent's hard work. This new place is constructed of the need to achieve educationally, her responsibility as eldest daughter, her desire 'not to be an unhappy Asian wife', and her father's wish for his children to embrace the democratic freedoms of 'modern Australia' (UP 215-6). Agheare is bound by recognition of her parents' toil to create that 'space of opportunity' for their children – 'study hard', 'love sensibly', embrace democracy. She is born in the refugee camp before her family's migration to Australia, but much of her childhood is spent in Footscray. She is the oldest of four children and carries the filial obligations of the oldest child in a Chinese family.

¹⁸ James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: the Story of Australian Immigration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 22-23.

¹⁹ Jupp 26.

²⁰ Teo, 'Phantom Limbs' 522.

²¹ Teo, 'Phantom Limbs' 524.

The book presents the reader with a wry and respectful description of Chinese-Cambodian traditions, especially in the domestic sphere. As the cover blurb suggests, 'In a wonderland called Footscray, Alice and her Chinese-Cambodian family pursue the Australian Dream – Asian style'. As a marketing tool, the values represented on the book's back cover represent the 'Asian Australian experience' in the 'orientalising' terms that Teo describes above, yet Pung's memoir renders these stereotypes in nuanced and compassionate terms. Rather than reject its clichés of 'Asian' experience, Pung's gentle parody asserts her family's place within Melbourne's urban and domestic spaces by connecting the 'wonderland' to her parents' history. The following passage subverts the imperial gaze presented by Michel de Certeau in his famous essay, 'Walking in the City' by comically presenting a Chinese-Cambodian's perception of the mosaic of people in the streets 'below':²²

From the top floor of the Rialto building my parents see that the people below amble in a different manner, and not just because of the heat. No bomb is ever going to fall on top of them. No one pissing in the street, except of course in a few select suburbs. No lepers. No Khmer Rouge-type soldiers dressed like black ants prodding occupants of the Central Business District into making a mass exodus to Wangaratta. Most people here have not even heard about Brother Number One in Socialist Cambodia, and to uninitiated ears his name sounds like an Eastern European stew: Would you like some Pol Pot? It's made with 100 per cent fresh-ground suffering. (UP 9)

Pung's achievements as an author and lawyer reflect the privileges given to her by her parents and their labour in establishing a new home. Yet she is mindful of her position in between the worlds of academia and family life, returning to the family home in Footscray often. In an article in *The Age* entitled 'My Space', Pung highlights the very different experiences of a new generation when describing her life as a full-time writer living in a flat at Melbourne University:

I'm used to looking after young people, so it would be strange to live by myself. It would seem like a very selfish existence. I tried once being a full-time writer but it only lasted about two-and-a-half months and then I went back to working. ... It felt really self-indulgent, considering how hard my parents work. (UP 9)

By contrast, Hsu-Ming Teo's bittersweet novel *Behind the Moon* explores the shifting identities of a younger generation in the friendship of three disparate figures in the western Sydney suburb of Strathfield – Vietnamese-Australian Tien (whose unknown father was African-American), Chinese-Singaporean-Australian Justin, and

²² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* trans. S Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1988). De Certeau suggests the social and historical 'openings' created by the twistings, disruptions and u-turns of walkers in a city, who re-interpret, appropriate and modify the text written by the city's urban planners and architects. The gaze of the 'imperial' architects of Western society is presented as the vantage point from the top of the Empire State Building.

Anglo-Australian Nigel ‘Gibbo’ Gibson.²³ Each character longs for an identity detached from the harsh particularities of filial obligations and intergenerational history by desiring something other than those given. This works cleverly as a set of reversals, rendering the desire for ‘origins’, both national and diasporic, as a futile one. As Robyn Morris suggests, Teo critiques the heterosexual social imaginary of ‘white nationhood’ through the character of Justin, a gay Chinese-Australian male who swoons over a poster of the two main characters in Weir’s film *Gallipoli* and eventually leaves the western suburbs to live inner-city with his Anglo-Australian lover.²⁴ ‘Gibbo’ so desires to share a commonality with his friends that he invents a Chinese ancestry, drawing on text-book national history by claiming that an ancestor was a Chinese migrant during the gold-rush era. Gibbo becomes obsessed with Tien’s mother when he is older. In contrast, a young Tien cherishes the English lessons given by Gibbo’s mother Gillian and desires her to replace her real mother Linh, who only appears in Tien’s life in early adolescence as a Vietnamese refugee. The identity Tien discovers in Australian English becomes the vehicle for Tien’s rebellion against *hieu thao* (BTM 49, 366)²⁵, the ‘moral debt’ of a Vietnamese daughter to her parents, yet her upbringing in Linh’s extended family and her longing for a maternal presence means that her emotional detachment has its limitations.

***Hieu Thao* and Speech Acts between Mothers and Children**

Teo also weaves her novel with citation from Nguyen Du’s popular nineteenth century verse text *The Tale of Kieu* with epigraphs foreshadowing each chapter’s moral focus. Alexander Woodside has suggested that *The Tale of Kieu* is a text that is central to the Vietnamese consciousness, commonly taught to children as an ‘emotional laboratory’ against which to measure their judgments of ‘personal morality and political obligation’.²⁶ It is the tragic tale of a woman who commits many errors of judgment in love and life. Linh’s memory of the *Tale of Kieu* is tied to her childhood bond with her father.²⁷ Mr Ho owned a printing press in Cholon that published Vietnamese literature before the war until it was destroyed by the police after the war.²⁸ Such is the strength of this verse to communicate from parent to child that, after separation from the family and a love affair and pregnancy to an African-American GI called Bucky, Linh sends her father a hand-written note with a verse

²³ Ien Ang and Ouyang Yu have both commented on the ‘hyphenated identities’ implied in such labels as both representing the particular condition of hybridity and also the centre-margin relationships implied in ‘white’ nationhood. Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Ouyang Yu, *Bias: Offensively Chinese-Australian: A Collection of Essays on China and Australia* (Kingsbury: Otherland Publishing, 2007).

²⁴ Robyn Morris, ‘Growing Up an Australian’: Renegotiating Mateship, Masculinity and ‘Australianness’ in Hsu-Ming Teo’s *Behind the Moon*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 27: 1-2, (Feb-May 2006) 151-166.

²⁵ *Hieu thao* is a Vietnamese concept and carries with it the particularities of Vietnamese culture, but it could also apply more broadly to the filial piety of many Chinese children towards their parents. The Ho family in the novel are both of Vietnamese and of Chinese heritage, the latter identity known as *hoa* in Vietnam. The glossary in *Behind the Moon* defines *hieu thao* as ‘filial piety and moral debt to one’s parents’.

²⁶ Alexander Woodside cited in John Swensson, ‘The Tale of Kieu’, Cupertino, CA: Deanza College, 20 May 2009, <http://www.deanza.edu/faculty/swensson/kieu.html>.

²⁷ Teo, *Behind the Moon* 214.

²⁸ Teo, *Behind the Moon* 257.

from *Kieu*. While the character of Tien's mother Linh is the most obvious likeness to Kieu, allusions to the text's emphasis on filial piety, moral righteousness, love, fate and identity through the tropes of wandering and homelessness are threaded throughout *Behind the Moon*. Particular focus here is on this sense of homelessness that changes the terms of *hieu thao* between Linh and her daughter Tien. In an epigraph to a chapter titled 'Mother and Daughter', Nguyen's words underscore Linh and Tien's changing relationship: 'Kieu said, "You once bore me, you've brought me up, a double debt I've not repaid one whit."²⁹

These negotiations and reversals across identities, sexualities, histories, languages and heritages are played out in that in-between space discussed above, one that is not fixed by boundaries of home but is defined by homelessness. This is pertinent to Tien's childhood empathy with Dorothy in the film *The Wizard of Oz* (BTM 22-3). Similarly, Alice Pung alludes to Lewis Carroll's positioning of a child's psychic space in 'wonderland', yet in *Unpolished Gem* 'wonderland' is presented as her family's perception of the promise of the 'free' world in Australia. In *Behind the Moon* Tien's early allegiance with Dorothy comes from her identity as the 'unnecessary daughter' under the obligated guardianship of her Auntie Ai-Van and Uncle Duong, a niece 'whose different skin colour attested to dubious parentage and the sins of her missing mother' (BTM 23). Tien's sense of only partially belonging to this family increases her sense of homelessness and is not alleviated by her mother Linh's appearance when she is thirteen years old. When Linh enters her life, Tien refuses to speak Vietnamese to her and constantly asserts that a mother should 'earn her respect', not be given it automatically. This is Tien's conscious rejection of *hieu thao*. Her struggle to replace it with Anglo-Australian ideas about mother-daughter relationships (ones promoted by her early companionship with Gillian Gibson) is also, in a sense, shared by her mother, who also insists on speaking English in the home. When Tien moves to the affluent eastern suburbs with her Chinese fiancé Stanley Wong, her struggle to leave behind *hieu thao* and become 'assimilated' is distorted. Her opportunity to appear to be the obligated 'Asian' daughter comes when her old friend Gibbo becomes obsessed with her mother. As a play of protection, Tien and Stanley convince Linh to take out an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) against him (BTM 196). Linh succumbs to her daughter's conviction in order to appease the relationship, yet she is aware of the fickle betrayal of Tien to her old friend.

If *Behind the Moon* extends the motif of friendship found in both *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Tale of Kieu*, it also explores the negotiations a daughter makes between friendship and the moral codes of *hieu thao*. Throughout both stories, comparisons are made about the relationship of Chinese and Vietnamese children to their parents. For Linh, the privilege of mother-daughter friendship is something made possible by the benefits of democratic freedom in the West:

It was difficult to calibrate your maternal expectations in a different cultural milieu; to determine what was and was not reasonable. Linh had been seduced by the idea of inter-generational friendship. ... In a culture where there was no automatic respect and deference towards the elderly, adult children met their

²⁹ Nguyen Du, *The Tale of Kieu*, cited in BTM 196.

parents on equal ground. The rudeness and impatience could be heart-stumbling, but the loss of authority was offset by the lure of intimacy. (BTM 241)

In *Unpolished Gem*, these democratic freedoms are contrasted not only in the relationships between parent and child but also in the children's attitudes to love and courtship: 'Australian democracy seemed to be available to all by the mere shedding of your clothes. ... because their parents must not know, because their parents knew nothing about being free to love' (UP 100-1). Pung also explores the customary speech acts between Chinese mothers and their children when Agheare tries to help with her mother's English. Text-book questions like 'how are you today' could not be answered by her mother as 'these were questions Chinese children never asked their parents' (UP 144). The intimacy implied in the question would not translate. Agheare's mother's isolation emerges as a mystery illness that she translates as a spiritual lack after they move into their new, bigger house and she shifts the Buddhist shrine to different positions (UP 132-3). The family's growing affluence means that she does not have to continue her outworker occupation, the making of gold jewellery that has caused a deterioration of sight and gnarled hands. Yet the bigger, vacant house, an outward symbol of migrant success in a new country, further serves to isolate her from her children. Agheare's mother does not easily take to the English language and therefore loses her ability to communicate with her children. The impetus to learn English is driven by her fear of losing her children's attachment to her. Her growing inability to 'enter the world of her children's minds' is mirrored in Agheare's feelings of muteness and detachment from her heritage:

The quieter I became at school, the louder my mother became at home. She was loud because she could not read or speak the secret talk we knew. She could not read because she had been housebound for two decades. And now, over the dinner table, she would watch as my father and his children littered their language with English terms, until every second word was in the foreign tongue. ... She sat there staring at us, trying to make sense of these aliens at her table. (UP 143)

Many Australian writers of Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, Singaporean, Malaysian, Indian heritage, indeed, many second generation immigrant writers, describe the negotiation of being in between worlds, in between their parents' histories and their place in Australian society. Yet this is not specific to 'Asian' diasporas in Australia – across countries, writers as diverse as Edward Said and Eva Hoffman have described the constant negotiation of moving across cultures as immigrant children. Chinese-Australian poet Ouyang Yu also suggests his own bi-lingual existence in a transitional site: 'As an *erbuxiang*, I am neither here nor there'.³⁰ In *Out of Place: A Memoir*, Said describes a sense of fractured identity from the unique hybridity of his parents' many heritages (Egyptian, Palestinian, Lebanese,

³⁰ Ouyang Yu, 'Motherland, Otherland: Small Issues' in *Antipodes* 18:1 (June 2004) 50-56. See also, Ouyang Yu 2007, *Bias: Offensively Chinese-Australian: A Collection of Essays on China and Australia* (Kingsbury: Otherland Publishing, 2007).

American) perceived through the lens of language.³¹ By doing so, Said weaves a family history through the trope of an intersection of languages – languages spoken from parent to child through the generations; languages used for naming and re-naming; language as *affect*. His mother’s utterances flowed between Arabic and English; ‘that infinitely maternal atmosphere’ filtered into Said’s subjectivity, a comfortable and commanding presence throughout his life:

I trace this primal instability back to my mother, whom I remember speaking to me in both English and Arabic, although she always wrote to me in English – once a week, all her life, as did I, all of hers. Certain spoken phrases of hers like *tislamli* or *mish ‘arfa shu bididi’* amal? Or *rouh’ha* – dozens of them – were Arabic, and I was never conscious of having to translate them or, even in cases like *tislamli*, knowing exactly what they meant. They were a part of her infinitely maternal atmosphere, which in moments of great stress I found myself yearning for in the softly uttered phrase ‘*ya mama,*’ an atmosphere dreamily seductive then suddenly snatched away, promising something in the end never given.³²

Mrs Said’s ‘speech acts’ say much about the filial bond between mother and son. They show how each language functions to communicate tenderness and instruction: ‘Once my mother left Arabic and spoke English there was a more objective and serious tone that mostly banished the forgiving and musical intimacy of *her* first language, Arabic’.³³ In *Unpolished Gem*, Pung’s perception of her family’s histories and futures are tempered by her obligated position in between two conflicting matriarchal figures – her grandmother and her mother. Both women tell her stories to dominate the ‘maternal atmosphere’. As a result, Agheare is destined to become a ‘word spreader’, carrying the burden of her family’s secrets on her shoulders. Therefore, in early childhood Agheare is conduit and appeaser, translator and mediator to the older generations of women. These stories are not only about the past, but also criticisms between two generations of mothers: ‘After all, “Ma” is also the word she uses for grandmother, just two tones different’ (UP 30). Her grandmother is a strong Chinese woman who taught in the Women’s College in Cambodia. Her belief in education and her stories of political activism in China influence the young daughter’s identity. Her mother constantly feels that her daughter is slipping away from her through the power of her grandmother’s words, words ‘with bones in them’, words ‘to make the other person fall flat on their back and die a curly death’, words to protect (UP 36).

The Transition to English: Disembodied Speech Acts

Agheare’s growing sense of obligation as oldest daughter in a Chinese family is re-enforced by each of the parental figures. Pung also describes Agheare’s growing loss of speech in later adolescence as a gradual acculturation into thinking and feeling in the English language. Therefore, central to the translation of parental history is Agheare’s psychological breakdown towards the end of her schooling. This is described in terms of disembodiment and death: ‘I woke up one morning with a false

³¹ Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (London: Granta, 2000).

³² Said 3-4.

³³ Said 4.

skin on my face. This skin was made of rubber, and it took great effort to move the muscles. ... I felt a funeral in my brain' (UP 177). This is a transitional moment of moving away from her parents' subjectivities and is affected by the illness of her grandmother, her accidental dropping of her baby sister and her final year exams. At the centre of Agheare's depression is the growing inability to 'think in Cantonese' and translate her feelings to her non-English speaking mother. Communicating to her parents in Cantonese is only performed for functional purposes such as helping her mother translate the accounts at the family's electronics store. Her time as 'word spreader' is over – she speaks to her siblings and her father in English; she cannot 'think' in Cantonese. Underscoring her grandmother's illness is a sense of something dying within her, signified by banned Cantonese words:

Four sounded like the word for 'dead' in Chinese so if you were Cantonese you could never use that word. *Sei lah! Sei Sei Sei!* Dead dead dead dead. My grandmother never let us use the word because she was scared of the dead, and death, and the dead. (UP 180)

The metaphor of a rubber death mask to signify Agheare's transition from adolescence to adulthood can be likened to descriptions in other memoirs of migration, including Eva Hoffman's story of child migration from Poland to Canada, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*.³⁴ Sneja Gunew suggests that Hoffman's gradual accumulation of Canadian English as an overlapping interior language is preceded by a sense of speechlessness as her capacity to think through the nuances and lyricism of Polish dissolves: 'I'm not filled with language anymore, and have only a memory of fullness to anguish me with the knowledge that, in this dark and empty state, I don't really exist.'³⁵ As she transitions into speaking Canadian English, her gestures and physical language also change into, as Gunew suggests, 'local ways of being "feminine"'.³⁶ This is signified by a shift in the tone and inflection of her voice. English is uttered from a different part of her body, a 'tight, thin, and mat' voice that travels from somewhere in her throat, rather than the undulating tone of her native Polish that moves from her stomach to her head.³⁷ In her essay, 'Corporeal Choreographies of Transnational English', Gunew analyses three autobiographical texts to reveal how English functions as a 'somatic' and 'corporeal' technology.³⁸ Gunew's examination of linguistic *affect* is very useful in understanding particular shifts in physical and emotional manifestations of language by immigrant children. Teo's novel and Pung's memoir both show how, in Gunew's words, 'learning to speak English structured, or at least choreographed, bodies in certain ways'.³⁹ In *Behind the Moon* English and Englishness is explored as a form of citation. In *Unpolished Gem*, certain words in Cantonese have physical and spiritual

³⁴ Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language* (Vintage: London, 1998).

³⁵ Hoffman cited in Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations: the Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 62.

³⁶ Gunew 62.

³⁷ Gunew 62.

³⁸ Gunew 51-64.

³⁹ Gunew 57.

significance so much so that Agheare becomes faceless when she loses her ability to think in her mother's language.

In many of these stories, English is implied at the centre of the social imaginary, both in terms of national and transnational identities. In her essay, 'Phantom Limbs', Teo describes the reaction of her English teacher to an essay she wrote on English culture in high school. Making an assumption about Teo's cultural background, her English teacher did not believe that this student, 'a Malaysian-Singaporean-Chinese Australian girl from the western suburbs of Sydney', would be qualified to 'know' English culture so well.⁴⁰ In reality, Teo's parents also grew up with an English education in Malaysia and Singapore. Teo was given many of the works of the English literary canon by her parents, both before and after migration. As mentioned, Teo saw her cultural understandings as 'British-Australian'.⁴¹ In her novel *Behind the Moon*, influences on the perceptions and desires of the three friends are ones from English and American culture. The central comic moment surrounding the 'Dead Diana Dinner', Justin's admiration of the 'mates' in Weir's *Gallipoli*, the influence of Gillian Gibson on Tien's English education, Linh's desire to understand the models of family presented in women's magazines, all underscore Australia's colonial inheritance and the boundaries of 'nation' in migrants' and children's lives. In contrast, Pung's Agheare describes her acculturation by way of English education in terms of loss. While her grandmother becomes increasingly old and frail, English literature overtakes Agheare's capacity to interact with her grandmother's stories of her girlhood in China: 'the only sort of real that had any meaning and depth was depicted in the white and black pages of Shakespeare, the universality of human experience accessible only to erudite people who could read it' (UP 175). Agheare would be 'hearing one thing and seeing another' as she sat by her grandmother's bedside, until 'nothing made much sense' to her any more (UP 176). English, therefore, is presented as a mode of erasure of Agheare's heritage, especially of maternal memory.

Hoffman also proposes that the gradual hybridisation of spoken languages between Polish and English is both a loss and a continually evolving transformation. Single words are distorted without the *transportation* of the 'language around it'.⁴² Yet Hoffman also emphasises the performativity of this tension, modification and collaboration in the merging of old and new languages:

When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative. Like everybody, I am the sum of my languages – the language of my family and childhood, and education and friendship, and love, and the larger, changing world – though perhaps I tend to be more aware than most of the fractures between them, and of the building blocks.⁴³

⁴⁰ Teo, 'Phantom Limbs' 522.

⁴¹ Teo, 'Phantom Limbs' 522.

⁴² Hoffman 272.

⁴³ Hoffman 273.

Hoffman is indicating what Iain Chambers calls the ‘nomadic experience of language, wandering without a fixed home’.⁴⁴ Hoffman’s suggestion of the cross-breeding of languages performed in the speech act is therefore relevant to immigrant childrens’ acts of cultural translation. Such transformative speech acts cannot be defined in terms of the fixed boundaries of national identities. *Unpolished Gem* and *Behind the Moon* re-tell stories of new generations negotiating between the past in the present, migrancy and nation, parent and child. In this way, they provide nuanced understandings of migrant experiences in Australian literature.

⁴⁴Chambers 4.