"The Rain Might Bloom:" Diaspora, Place and Depictions of Water in the Poetry of Bella Li

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Abstract:
Bella Li's writing engages in intertextual ways with philosophy, cartography and writing by other poets and from a diasporic perspective she also engages inventively with Australian literary tropes. Focusing on two poems from Li's chapbook *Maps, Cargo* (2013), "Just Then" and "Drowning Dream," I argue that these poems use intertextual references to enact a form of diasporic place-making through the creation of doubled places. Each of the poems references a poet from the United States of America, John Ashbery for "Just Then" and Anne Sexton for "Drowning Dream," but each poem also complicates this reference via diasporic citational practices. In the poems this complication, and the act of place-making, is carried out through depictions of water. The doubled properties of water as depicted in these poems are able to offer transformation and reflection, something which allows the doubleness of diasporic place-making to emerge through the intertextuality of the poems. This artistic practice in turn adds a significant diasporic viewpoint to Australian literary criticism about place.

Keywords: diaspora, water, place-making, Asian-Australian, contemporary poetry

Bella Li's writing engages in intertextual ways with philosophy, cartography and writing by other poets. This intertextuality engages with different forms of place and place-making. Focusing on two poems from *Maps, Cargo*, "Just Then" and "Drowning Dream," I argue that these poems use intertextual references to enact a form of diasporic place-making through the creation of doubled places. Each of the poems references a poet from the United States of America, John Ashbery for "Just Then" and Anne Sexton for "Drowning Dream," and each poem also complicates this reference via a diasporic lens. In the poems this complication, and the act of place-making, is carried out through depictions of water. The doubled properties of water as depicted in these poems are able to offer transformation and reflection, something which allows the doubled place of diasporic place-making to emerge through the intertextuality of the poems. This in turn adds a significant diasporic viewpoint to Australian literary criticism about place.

Bella Li lives in Melbourne, having moved from China to Australia at age of three, and is well known for her multiple-prize-winning book *Argosy* (2017). Michelle Cahill in her introduction to *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* writes that "Bella Li's prose poems are discontinuous, beautifully rendered and portentous" (25). Li herself identifies her interest "in poetry that writes onto history, that has at its base something concrete and tangible that has existed in the world" ("Interview") and that "in my poems, which are generally inclined towards the visual, I am often appropriating other titles and phrases and themes, disassembling and reassembling" ("Spirit"). Indeed the explicit referentiality of Li's works gives them many of their notable characteristics: of multiplicity, of reaching outwards and of being within the world while also making this aesthetic process strange for the reader. Li writes that her works "are an attempt to create whole worlds that have a particular internal consistency—in this sense, they ask you to believe in something that

does not otherwise exist, as do all constructions made from language" ("Argosy"). But she also states that "[t]he more I think about poetry as a genre, the more I see it as a space for estrangement: where language—that which ostensibly provides a common ground on which to stand—can be most thoroughly interrogated" ("Spirit"). This doubling in Li's poems, of worldbuilding with an internal consistency, but also of worldbuilding that is rendered strange, is a key element of what I read as part of the diasporic consciousness present in "Just then" and "Drowning dream."

Li says that she does "worry that my gender and my ethnicity will influence the way in which people read my work. But I am realising that you can't escape categorisation, and it isn't necessarily a bad thing" ("Interview"). In walking a line between identifying as an Asian Australian poet and not wanting to be reduced to set categories, Li is certainly not alone. The issues of essentialism, identification and monolithic discourse surrounding identity are discussed by Adam Aitken, Kim Cheng Boey and Michelle Cahill, editors of the *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* anthology, in their introduction to the volume. Li does appear to assent to being located in this sometimes fraught identitarian space, and she does identify as Australian. She says: "I've lived here for most of my life, and for that reason alone I would consider myself an Australian poet. It is a matter of pure geography" ("Interview"). The complex nature of identification, particularly when it relates to geography and cateorgisation, is something that I argue is diasporic in Li's referential place-making poetry.

Diasporic Consciousness in Place-Making

Many scholars have discussed what diaspora, and a diasporic consciousness, may entail. Brij V. Lal in *Sociology of Diaspora* identifies both the idea of a homeland as well as a country of residence in describing the way diaspora, in its "[o]rdinary usage of the word today would include reference to a common ancestral homeland, voluntary or involuntary migration, and a sense of separateness and marginality in the country of residence" (ix). Expanding on this idea, the editors of the collection, Ajaya Kumar Sahoo and Brij Maharaj, note that while "[a] significant feature of all diasporic communities is their linkage or network with the motherland, this link can be "imaginary or real" (7), thus identifying how the imagination is a key element of this relationship between homelands and diasporas, which is particularly important when considering how a sense of diasporic *consciousness* may work. Sahoo and Maharaj also point out: "[i]t is obvious that the diasporic condition can be rather dynamic and ambivalent, but this should not always be interpreted in an exclusively negative way, since the sense of alienation from the host society often coexists with a sense of belonging" (7). Here Sahoo and Maharaj identify key aspects of this kind of diasporic consciousness: that it combines a sense of alienation as well as belonging; can be dynamic and ambivalent; and is never as simple as some of these binaries may suggest. In *Theorizing Diaspora,* Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur support this position, describing how "the term diaspora itself—a term which literally (and on a historical level, negatively), denotes communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration, or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion"—could also suggest etymologically "the (more positive) fertility of dispersion, dissemination, and the scattering of seeds" (4). This combination of the positive and negative, of fertility but also dislocation, is one of the qualities which makes diasporic consciousness such a rich object of analysis.

Braziel and Mannur point to the significance of these qualities of diasporic consciousness when they claim that "[b]y addressing the conditions that allow and oblige people to inhabit more than one of these national spaces, theorizations of diaspora have acquired

an increasingly important space within critical discourse on race, ethnicity, nation, and identity" (6). The same could be said of analyses that use literary sources to investigate how a sense of diasporic consciousness may be constructed through texts. However, Braziel and Mannur urge caution regarding what theorisations of diaspora should investigate. They argue that "diaspora studies will need to move beyond theorizing how diasporic identities are constructed and consolidated and must ask, how are these diasporic identities practiced, lived, and experienced?" (9). Indeed, as important as theoretical interventions like Homi Bhabha's have been in the field, Braziel and Mannur argue that equally significant are analyses that discuss the specificities of diasporic lives. To this I would add the importance of creative works by those within diasporas, as these attend to the experiences of diasporas as well as the imaginative potential that thinking through diaspora may entail. Further, it is very important to consider how a sense of diasporic consciousness may add to common themes in Australian literature, such as the importance of place. Knut Hidle in his contribution to *Sociology of Diaspora* argues that:

> [O]ne should not theoretically close and fix places with certain meanings and identities, but instead treat place as a contextual and contested concept. Nevertheless, in focusing on culture and meaning systems which are not bound to place, it is very easy to overlook the fact [that] even migrants settle somewhere, at least for a while, and the question then becomes how life goes on where they settle. (89)

Here Hidle acknowledges the need to ensure that as a concept place remains contested and contextual. But he also stresses the need for greater attention to the concept of place, as it is one that is under-examined in discussions of diaspora and yet critical to diasporic experience. Mainstream discourses of place can often assume a long-term sense of residency and a sense of stability within or through place. In contrast, diasporic criticism often foregrounds a sense of movement and dislocation. When potentially contradictory discourses around stability and movement are engaged together, they can provide fertile territory. Diasporic criticism reveals that stability and a lengthy residency is not the only relationship to place that is possible. Place criticism, differing again from mainstream place discourses and diasporic criticism, reveals that even highly moveable diasporic groups do settle in places temporarily, and that even if it is contested and highly contextual, a relationship to place is not necessarily alien to this group. I call this sense of creating place "diasporic place-making," and I will examine how this phenomenon works in Bella Li's poems through depictions of water.

Water as an Element of Transformation

Maureen Devine and Christa Grewe-Volpp, editors of *Words on Water: Literary and Cultural Representations*, discuss the way that "[w]ater as a continually changing entity—sweet or salty, still or raging, frozen or crystallized or even evaporated, in the form of rain (drops), snow (flakes), sleet, hail, glaciers, icebergs, rivers, lakes, puddles, oceans, warm or cold and all the variations in between—challenges cultural perceptions of it" (3). As water is often used to represent change in literary depictions, this allows it to be particularly flexible in terms of its uses and the meanings it is ascribed. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis, in their edited collection *Thinking with Water*, argue that water as an idea challenges cultural perceptions through its representations. For both Devine and Grewe-Volpp and for Chen et al., water becomes an element that helps them think through, and with, various theories, contemporary cultural debates and environmental crises. Chen et al. foreground the transformative qualities of water, and Devine and Grewe-Volpp theorise water's changeability. For Chen

et al., "water offers a visceral experience of the transformations that all biota sense, both internally and in their surrounding environments. Unlike other kinds of elemental matter (earth, fire, air, metal, stone and wood, for example), water moves from solid to liquid to vapour with acute environmental responsiveness" (5). It is water's ability to constantly transform that makes it such a dynamic element in literary representations. For the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard: "One cannot bathe twice in the same river because already, in his inmost recesses, the human being shared the destiny of flowing water. Water is truly the transitory element" (6). Water is transformative because of its "acute environmental responsiveness" (Chen et al. 5) in that it can exist in multiple states in both humans and the nonhuman (evaporated, liquid, solid), something not shared by other elements. The transformative ability of water is also significant because: "Given that water is a transformative and transforming element, its situation can only be understood dynamically—as a materially complex intersection with a participant-observer in space and time. In articulating the situations of water, we shape the relations between our watery selves and our watery others" (Chen at al. 9). Here Chen et al. argue that understandings of water must always be dynamic and relate to both self and other, because water is an active force within the world. Chen et al. foreground that "[w]ater is a *matter* of relation and connection. Waters literally flow between and within bodies, across space and through time, in a planetary circulation system that challenges pretentions to discrete individuality" (12; emphasis in the original). Indeed, it is this action of connecting, of moving with and between bodies and environments, that is one of the reasons why literary depictions of water can be so complex and productive to analyse. Chen et al. also gesture to "water's relationality, and its ability to generate unexpected or unrecognized communities" (5) and argue that "water is a deep source of plurality and potential, as bodies share and connect through their common waters" (12). Here it is the combination of action, connection, relationality, potentiality and plurality that gives water some of its most powerful symbolic and material meanings. As an element that performs so much vital work, and comes to occupy such a varied and nuanced symbolic space, it is no wonder Chen et al. invite the reader to consider how, "given water's capacity to connect and combine, thinking the political with water might help us bring together issues and concerns too often addressed in isolation" (6). Indeed, it is just this ability to sustain variation while still forming connections, to be dynamic and changeable, which I will argue occurs in Li's poem "Just Then," in which a sense of transformation through depictions of water creates a sense of diasporic place.

"Just Then"

As an intertextual work, Li's prose poem "Just Then" engages with John Ashbery's poem "The Shower." Significantly, there are two versions of "The Shower," one published in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) and a rewritten version in *As We Know* (1979), making it a doubly intertextual poem. John Shoptaw, in his critical volume on Ashbery, discusses the relationship between *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) and *As We Know* (1979): "These summer poems preoccupy themselves with the question of place. Ashbery means 'place' not only spatially, as an inhabited 'space,' but [also] temporally, as an event 'taking place.' To make a space a place means to inhabit it, and to be occupied by [it] in turn" (237–8). Proposing that space for Ashbery is both physical and a kind of event, Shoptaw's ideas align with those of David Perkins, who argues that Ashbery "dwells on the impossibility of credibly imagining any reality," that "the imagination creates, destroys and immediately creates another vision of reality," and that for "Ashbery the process is enormously speeded up. His envisionings of reality are not merely provisional; they transform themselves and disappear in the very process of being proposed" (Perkins). According to both Shoptaw and Perkins, Ashbery's version of place becomes not only a

physical space and a space for the event, but also a creative, transformative space that is continually being built and reconstituted. It is this idea of place, as a transformative event that is continually built and dismantled, that I argue Li draws on in her poem "Just Then," but that she also includes a closing disruption, a move which I argue makes it an instance of diasporic place-making.

In the first line of Li's "Just then" the speaker states:

> Just then "the water began to fall quite quietly." (9)

This is consistent with the 1962 poem. Ashbery's 1975 version, however, begins with a rewriting of this line: "The water began to fall quite quickly" (line 1). Through intertextuality with a revised and re-published poem, here Li already introduces the idea of place as doubled and unstable: a re-written place is then rewritten again in her poem. The referent of the water falling also adds a layer of uncertainty. This could be the water falling in the lake, or it could be water falling as rain. Critic Paul Carter links depictions of rain directly to transformation, however, here the reading is ambiguous as it is not revealed how the water is falling. Li here utilises a rewritten line to introduce a sense of uncertainty that is then enhanced by the ambiguity of the falling water.

The speaker of the poem and another person are sitting on the shore of Goose Lake with "little Jimmy" (line 2). Goose Lake here could be referring to the alkaline lake near the Fandango Pass, a route used to enter California during the Gold Rush. The way the scene is depicted in the following lines is reminiscent of tourist advertising and brochures: "It was lovely and floral on the shore (it / wasn't often you saw chintz in the wild)" (lines 3–4). Here the use of chintz, a fabric often found on sofas, to describe the scene brings a sense of the domestic, but also of fabrication and advertising language denoting comfort and escape. The chintz sofa is a familiar domestic object, but here "in the wild" it is a rarety or a novelty, something worth travelling to see. Li's speaker describes how "The sun was setting / over the lake, which gave it a charming wet look" (lines 4–5). The line brings into question whether the lake really does contain water on which sun reflects, or whether the lake is in fact dry but the sun hitting the rain that has just fallen gives it a "wet look" or, using the idea of travel brochures, whether this is an image that has been manipulated to make it look "wet." Perkins describes how Ashbery is well-known for using discourses such as journalism or advertising in his work and often contrasts them in the same poem. Here Li could be seen as doing something similar, bringing discourses of tourism and domestic magazines into the description of Goose Lake, but in a way that does not allow the reader to settle. It is not certain which aspect the speaker settles on, rather their descriptions leave a sense of uncertainty with the reader.

The speaker then describes an earlier time and/or place: "It had begun late in the afternoon, like one of those / long, warm evenings in New York when ad executives loosen / their ties and all the secretaries start taking their clothes off / in the street" (lines 6–9). To this is then added "It had begun like a hole in a bank wall, spitting / money" (lines 9–10), a possible reference to the Gold Rush. In the next line the speaker asks: "Had it ended? Here on the shores of Goose Lake?" (line 10). This sense of despair could certainly derive from Gold Rush narratives with hope for wealth, ending instead in locations perceived as remote. Li adds to this sense by deploying irony: "Ah, / California!" (lines 10–11). "All the juicy oranges getting juicier. All the furry / marmots running about, eating nuts to pass the time" (lines 12–13) is again reminiscent of a tourist brochure, but that discourse is punctured when "Jane said, 'To tell the truth it's been three

weeks'. / The oranges were silent. Nobody said anything except the / marmots, cunningly chewing their nuts" (lines 14–16). The sense of easy optimism promoted through travel discourses is interrupted by the place itself, which resists these depictions. Further, this also interrupts the earlier discourse of the domestic, as embodied by the chintz. "The lake lost its floral aspect" (line 19) disputes the discourses of tourism and domesticity the speaker introduced earlier and also their own earlier assessment of the place. These complications of the representation of place lead into the last line of the poem: "The water was falling horizontally and also, now, quietly" (line 20). It is important to note that the words of this last line are almost the same as the first line, which Li borrows from Ashbery. Li's first and last lines read:

> Just then "the water began to fall quite quietly". (line 1)
> The water was falling horizontally and also, now, quietly. (line 20)

What is significant here is that the water is still falling, but that parts of it have changed. From falling "quite quietly" to falling "quietly" and from falling to "falling horizontally." Such a change is certainly not drastic, but it is suggestive, as it foregrounds Li's engagement with Ashbery's poetry and notion of place, but also her transformation of it, which I read as diasporic place-making. The Goose Lake referred to is likely the site in California, but it also suggests another Goose Lake, that of the Goose Lake Monastery in China, which was the site of a twelfth-century Confucian debate between Chu Hsi and Lu Chiu-yüan. Julia Ching writes about the importance of this debate as it relates to the conflict between learning and wisdom, where Chu relied on his solid classical learning and on quiet sitting as a way to achieve goodness, while Lu favoured specific action and sought widom internally, rather than through the classics, as the way to wisdom. This "doubling" of Goose Lake calls into question the nature of the referentiality of the poem as it rewrites a sense of place—always questioning which place, and for whom. Li takes Ashbery's unstable, continually questioning sense of place and further destabilises it, working closely with Ashbery's notions, but in the final aspect also calling these into question. The water in the final line is falling horizontally, perhaps the lake water dropping, but it could also refer to a change in direction—if the initial water is falling vertically, and the final water falling horizontally, it could point to aspects of writing. Of Ashbery's more vertically set poems rather than Li's prose poem, or of different directions of writing being either vertically or horizonatally arranged on a page. I argue that this depiction of water and place-making by Li is, in fact, diasporic. By taking Ashbery's poetic discourse, appraised within the mainstream as "good poetry," and destabalising this status by writing within, between and alongside it, I argue that Li's poem complicates depictions of place, causing them to be doubled, tripled and further modified, but still not breaking them entirely.

I claim that this can be read as a form of diasporic place-making as it deliberately confounds ideas of origins and borrowings and insists on multiples. Anne Vickery and Ali Alizadeh discuss how:

> [C]ontemporary postcolonial and diasporic poetries often present the reader with an ethical charge. They link experience and aesthetics in ways that provoke, that are porous, that incorporate or engage with the Indigenous or local, that are hybrid without being co-opted to a cultural dominant, that are constantly unbecoming as much as they represent a coming community. And as such, they provide an expression of possibility and social transformation in radical, nuanced, infinitely generative ways. (20)

I argue that, aligning with Vickery and Alizadeh's conceptualisation, Li's poem is porous, hybrid, resistant to being subsumed into mainstream discourses, and is about unbecoming as much as it is about becoming. The poem certainly engages with ideas of social transformation, and this transformation instantiated through depictions of water results in the physical transformation of the space of the poem, posing questions about place and how it is constructed. By fashioning her own place, here in the horizontal lines of a poem, Li adds to discussions of place in Australian literature, specifically those that are concerned with beginnings and rewritings, to add a diasporic perspective on these issues.

Australian Literary Tropes Relating to Water

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have always had a deep and ongoing connection to land and sea through story, song and ceremony. When European colonisers arrived, however, they had a very different association to place, and many documented their experiences of alienation in Australia, particularly in relation to water. Michael Cathcart, in his history of this Anglo-Celtic-Australian relationship, describes the way water and place are often linked in Australian culture:

> Water is the fundamental limit on how Australians live. It determines where we establish our cities, how we think about country, how we farm it, build on it, defend it and dream about it. Of all the inhabited continents, Australia has the lowest average annual rainfall (almost half the rainfalls of Europe and North America), and the lowest level of river discharge (around one-sixth that of Europe or Asia). (2)

Indeed, given the contrast between the dryness of Australia and the expectations of the first European invaders, Cathcart calls the "First Fleeters" "wet-country people" and points to the way "[w]ater coursed through their industries, their farms, their buildings, their class relations, their faiths and superstitions, their songs and their games" (8). The gulf between expectations and reality in terms of water and place has become a trope of Australian literature for writers who do not identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. In *Intimate Horizons*, Australian literary and postcolonial scholars Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden describe the way in which "[w]ater, or its lack, is the source of much dystopian angst in Australian cultural history" (295). Writers have also explored the relationship between water and place in Australia in relation to the beach, although beach tropes are employed in much less dystopian ways than the lack-of-water trope described above. In *The Picador Book of the Beach*, novelist Robert Drewe claims that for many Australians the beach is a place that fulfils emotional, physical and at times ceremonial needs (6). Poet Andrew Taylor, in his article "Littoral Horizons," describes the beach as surrounding the Australian people and being "something they can't escape and rarely want to" (286). These two tropes linking water and place in Australian literature, that of the search for water in a dry continent and of the enjoyment of salt water at the beach, have frequently been analysed by critics of the work of Anglo-Celtic Australian writers.

Within postcolonial and diasporic writing and criticism, this notion of the beach as a space of leisure is being critiqued. Ann Vickery and Ali Alizadeh in their introduction to the Political Imagination issue of *Southerly* discuss the beach as a "predominant trope in Australian culture; it is a place that is simultaneously there and not there, stable and unstable. It is further associated with pleasure (leisure-time) and risk (of being beached or stranded), both temporalities beyond the everyday routines and labours" (19). The idea

of the beach a place with multiple readings, that can provide both leisure and risk, is also discussed by Suvendrini Perera. Perera critically examins the construction of Australia as an "island nation," arguing that "[t]he very banality, the taken for grantedness, of everyday representations of the island-nation ensure its continuity and its ability to be solicited, called upon, and mobilized, especially in conditions of perceived threat to its very territoriality. 'Girt by sea,' as form, image, idiom and ideology, locates insularity as Australia's defining characteristic" (10). Perera's analysis questions mainstream notions of sea, noting that Australia's island-nation insularity constantly reinforces its self-understanding as at risk of invasion.

In the following close reading I argue that Bella Li complicates Australian tropes of the sea in her poem "Drowning Dream." In contrast to the history of mainstream Anglo-Celtic-Australian writing that Cathcart describes, Li's poem depicts a place that is defined by an excess of water rather than lack. Further, Li also complicates Drewe and Taylor's idea of the sea and beach as a space of leisure because, in Li's poem, water is associated with drowning. However, it is not the speaker who drowns in this poem, rather the house which they are occupying is subject to the water. The house becomes transformed through this life-giving element into something quite different, suggest the forces of climate change and rising sea levels. This representation aligns more with Vickery and Alizadeh's and Perera's discussions of the sea within postcolonial and diasporic discourses, where these spaces become unstable, and which critique notions of "invasion" by questioning notions of unproblematised belonging and ownership over place.

"Drowning Dream"

The poem "Drowning Dream" (11) is published in Li's debut collection *Maps, Cargo* and is intertextual, this time drawing on the work of Anne Sexton. Li uses depictions of water to gradually transform a solid place into a reflection of the speaker's dream. Li creates, through the intertextuality with Sexton, a tricky and contradictory form of doubled place that I argue may be understood as being diasporic.

Li cites Sexton's "Imitations of Drowning," part of Sexton's celebrated collection *Live or Die* (1966). Sexton's book addresses her struggles with mental illness, and the poems chart her experience of partial recovery. "Imitations of Drowning" (16–17) explores the world of dreams and fear as the speaker narrates what it would feel like to drown. Li's poem draws on this idea, but modified.

Beginning with a variation on a line from Sexton's "Imitations of Drowning," Li's poem opens with: "That August I began to dream of drowning" (line 1). This line is then followed by: "It was the season / of water—strange storms troubled the air" (lines 1–2). As argued by Paul Carter, water and storms in Australian literature are often intimately linked with transformation (262–3). This second line emphasises transformative potential by describing this place as within a "season of water." Further, the poem can be seen as drawing on narratives surrounding climate change and rising sea levels. Like Ashcroft, and like in her poem "Just then" analysed earlier, Li can also be read as incorporating climate change discourses in her work. Here the reference to Sexton is compounded with references to narratives about coastlines "drowning" in the wake of rising sea levels. This is further supported by the term "strange storms," introducing both qualities of the dreamlike and the idea that these are storms not usually experienced in this location, again linked to climate change.

Having introduced the concept of dreaming of transformation, the speaker then goes on to discuss the place they are in, a house where they describe how: "All day I crept / along the edges of rooms, avoiding the precious windows— / half ajar, propped open with old newspapers—where the / green sky pooled. Outside, whole oceans flooded the garden, / encroaching on the house and its sagging porch" (lines 5–6). Again, the suggestion here is that of rising sea levels that are encroaching on the house, flooding the garden. The description of the sea or rain outside the windows as being where the "green sky pooled" adds an element of the dreamlike surreal to the depiction.

The water begins to encroach on the solid space of the house, causing the porch to sag. The water changes the shape of the house: "On the first / floor the eaves—swollen, bloated with salt" (lines 6–7). The next lines take this transformation a step further, as the house begins increasingly to resemble a dream: "On the second the / mirrors, weeping sodden light; the carpets stained with / moisture" (lines 7–9). Here, the depiction of water creates a sense of anthropomorphised unreality. Instead of just running off the mirrors, the storm water appears to transform the mirrors into something resembling the human, enough so that they can figuratively cry. The sense of unreality is then compounded; rather than crying watery tears the mirrors are "weeping sodden light." This sense of menace, a decrepit house with crying mirrors, suggests the experience of a nightmare. However, this place has not yet been entirely subsumed by this nightmarish tone. The stained carpet is still within the realm of the literal decaying house, rather than the symbolic decaying soul as represented by the mirrors. Unlike in Sexton's poem, here it is not the human body that is drowning, but the house. Paradoxically, as the house is drowning, it is depicted as taking on more and more of the characteristics of life.

In the next lines the speaker moves up to the third floor. Here: "I studied the ceiling for cracks through / which the rain might bloom" (lines 9–10). There is a kind of creepy agency to the "rain" that "might bloom," especially as Li leaves it ambiguous as to what kind of life may be blooming.

The speaker then describes how the water is continuing to creep: "The attic and landing damp. / The skirting and the sideboards. The clocks" (lines 10–11). What is of particular interest here is Li's use of domestic interiors. Bill Ashcroft describes how "formal modes of organization, institutions, metaphorically bounded sites, are traversed by informal spaces, inhabited by diasporas, migrants, exiles, refugees, nomads. These are sites of what might be called "interstitial emergence" but it is an emergence that functions by means of the act of habitation, through which identity construction takes place" (56). Li's use of domestic interiors resembles what Ashcroft calls inhabitation as Li's speakers inhabit spaces that are transformative, changeable and varied, although they are still domestic and function as an act of habitation. Through challenging the kinds of modes of habitation, and exposing them to questioning, I argue that Li's works depict a diasporic consciousness.

The poem then shifts when the speaker descends through the house: "Only once (in / the afternoon) I moved down to the basement, where a / man—quiet and still as a mouse—floated face-down in the / dark. Above us, the house hummed like a machine" (lines 11–14). Whether the man is dead or alive is not revealed by the poem, rather it remains the culmination of the nightmare-like atmosphere. The man floats without his face showing, which both adds to the nightmare tone and, along with his description as being only "a man," lends a de-individualised, surreal quality to the first appearance of a human figure in the poem.

In contrast to the quiet still human figure, the house itself hums. The humming here is depicted as having gone beyond life-like, and is now that of a machine, and it is quite startling and surreal as up until now the depictions of the house have been in keeping with that of a space being drowned. In this sense the house could be seen as alive, but in a way that is not human: the crying mirrors, the blooming rain and the humming all suggest action, but not necessarily of a benevolent kind.

In Sexton's poem there is a clearer demarcation between the speaker's experience of drowning and of dreaming of drowning. In Li's poem whether what is happening is a dream is not clearly marked, and the drowning is happening to figures external to the speaker. In both poems, depictions of water play a significant part; for Sexton it is the threat of water, while for Li the water transforms the surroundings in a way that appears menacing, but does not harm the speaker. But the depiction of the water in Li's poem does significantly transform the sense of place. The appearance of the drowned man is a human figure devoid of agency, in contrast to the drowned house that takes on increasing signs of life. Here the depiction of place is troubled as the water, a transformative life-giving element, takes away the human life and gives a strange, machine-like growing life to the house instead.

This depiction may be read as resistance to mainstream Australian literary tropes related to water. In Li's poem there is an excess, rather than a lack of water. Further, the water is not part of leisure activities related to the sea, but is instead a different kind of element, one that could be either life-giving or destructive. The depiction of water in the poem bestows a mechanical, menacing form of life onto the house the speaker inhabits. This transformation of place, causing it to become alive in a disturbing sense, complicates mainstream narratives about place in Australia. Instead Li's diasporic vision questions what giving life to a place may create and what it may destroy.

Conclusion

In both Li's poems, "Just Then" and "Drowning Dream," the depictions of water enact a transformation of the place represented in a way that I read as diasporic. Li's use of different discourses in the poems, as well as intertextual references to Anne Sexton and John Ashbery, foreground questions related to who constructs narratives, why, and for whom. The poems may also be understood as participating in a questioning of mainstream Australian literary tropes related to origins and common representations of water, instead revealing the ambiguous consequences of these narratives and unsettling the way these mainstream narratives view place. The use of water as an element of transformation in these poems reflects ideas of water as an apt medium for artistic explorations of place, as theorised by Chen et al. and Devine and Grewe-Volpp. I then read transformation through depictions of water as a form of diasporic place-making that does not privilege mobility or an ongoing connection to land, but rather asks what kinds of narratives we tell about place, and what these narratives reveal about us.

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