

Reappropriating the Colonisers' Language to Contest Racist and Sexist Stereotyping Processes in Kiwi Asian Poetry Written by Women

Marine Berthiot
*Laboratoire Lettres et Civilisations Étrangères,
Université Lumière Lyon 2, France*

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Abstract

Asian New Zealanders compose the second largest minority of Aotearoa New Zealand, after Māori and before Pasifika. Even though the first Chinese settlers were invited to work in the Otago goldmines in 1866, New Zealanders of Asian descent have long been perceived as mere sojourners. Constructed as the refused Other in a post-Treaty of Waitangi New Zealand, Kiwi Asians have suffered from a series of discriminatory laws, limiting and disempowering their community. Labour Prime Minister Helen Clarke officially apologised in 2002 for the institutional racism Kiwi Asians endured during colonisation. Following this historical redress, memory sites were preserved in the South Island to commemorate the role of this minority in the construction of Aotearoa New Zealand. This article compares six poems composed by three women writers: Nina Mingya Powles, Lily Ng, and Vanessa Mei Crofskey. It examines how these poems can be read as excavation sites which may testify to the cultural trauma of the Kiwi Asian community. Beyond the study of the impact of insidious trauma, a transpacific methodology is used to analyse herstory as a rewriting of the literary borders of Aotearoa New Zealand. I then observe how trauma-telling can be interpreted as a form of translation, transforming poems into multicultural and multilingual spaces where women writers can feel at home.

Les Néo-Zélandais d'origine asiatique composent la deuxième minorité ethnique du pays. Même si les premiers pionniers chinois se sont installés dans la région d'Otago en 1866, les Kiwis d'origine asiatique sont souvent perçus comme des migrants temporaires. Imaginée comme cet Autre exclu du Traité de Waitangi, cette population a subi de nombreuses discriminations au fil du temps. La Première Ministre Helen Clarke a présenté ses excuses officielles à cette minorité en 2002, reconnaissant le racisme institutionnel que les Néo-Zélandais d'origine asiatique avaient subi pendant la période coloniale. Suite à cette prise de conscience, des lieux de mémoire ont été ouverts au public sur l'Île du Sud pour commémorer le rôle joué par cette communauté dans la construction de la nation néo-zélandaise.

Cet article compare six poèmes écrits par trois poétesses : Nina Mingya Powles, Lily Ng et Vanessa Mei Crofskey, afin d'analyser la manière dont ces poèmes peuvent être lus comme des sites archéologiques témoignant du trauma culturel de la communauté asiatique d'Aotearoa Nouvelle-Zélande. Après avoir étudié l'impact des traumas insidieux, j'applique une méthodologie transpacifique pour analyser l'histoire des femmes comme une réécriture des frontières littéraires de la Nouvelle-Zélande. Je tente ensuite de comprendre la façon dont la narration des traumas peut être interprétée comme une forme de traduction qui génère un espace poétique permettant aux poétesses de se sentir chez elles, dans un lieu multiculturel et plurilingue.

Keywords

Kiwi Asian poetry, trauma studies, settler colonialism, transpacific studies, gender studies, racialised sexism

Poésie asiatique d'Aotearoa Nouvelle-Zélande, études sur le trauma, colonialisme de peuplement, études transpacifiques, études du genre, sexisme racialisé

In 2017, at a public lecture entitled “Poutokomanawa – The Heartpost,” multiple award-winning Māori writer Tina Makereti (of Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Te Ati Awa, Ngāti Rangatahi, Moriori, and Pākehā descent) noted that “if you can name a New Zealand Asian ancestor writer then I would love to hear of it” (n.pag.). Kiwi Asian literature, including poetry, went unnoticed for a long time – a silence which can be interpreted as a mark left by historical traumas on this community. Like the Asian Americans, Asian Canadians, and Asian Australians, Kiwi Asians

mostly originate from East Asia, unlike British Asians who mostly come from the South of Asia (Yu, *Diasporic Poetics* 21). However, the label ‘Asian New Zealander’ is often criticised for being homogenous and forgetful of cultural, linguistic, geographic, and historical differences. East Asians, South Asians, but also people from the Middle East can be included in this ethnicity in Aotearoa New Zealand censuses (Didham and Rocha 596-598; Wong et al. 282; Peiris-John et al. 36). What makes people identify with this ethnic ‘category’ in the settler colony is based on the fact that, as Timothy Yu notes, they are “racialized as ‘Asian’ in white majority cultures” (*Diasporic Poetics* 17). Despite having first settled in Aotearoa in 1866, more than a century and a half ago, Asian New Zealanders are still perceived as foreigners (Keown, “Sojourners” 4). By contrast, even though they are immigrants too, Pākehā (European New Zealanders) have transformed the territory and the social structure of Aotearoa by installing a Pākehā mainstream voice which imposes their views as the norm.

The first anthology of Kiwi Asian poetry, *A Clear Dawn: New Asian Voices from Aotearoa New Zealand*, was published in 2021. Its editors, Paula Morris (Ngāti Wai, Ngāti Manuhiri, Ngāti Whātua, and English) and Alison Wong (a fourth generation Chinese New Zealander) call Asian New Zealanders “tangata tiriti” (people allowed to stay in Aotearoa thanks to the Treaty of Waitangi), in reference to “Te Tiriti o Waitangi” (the name of the Treaty of Waitangi in the Māori language), the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand. This terminology counters the colonial discourse of marginalisation which has long denied Kiwi Asians the part they have played in the construction of Aotearoa New Zealand as a nation. Signed on 6 February 1840 but only implemented since the foundation of the Tribunal of Waitangi in 1975, “Te Tiriti o Waitangi” is the Māori version of the Treaty of Waitangi, which is not the exact translation of its English double. While the English version of the Treaty was used to impose settler colonialism via massive land confiscation, Māori loss of sovereignty, and acculturation, “Te Tiriti o Waitangi” preserves Māori civil rights and their guardianship over the land and its natural resources. The Tribunal of Waitangi examines the claims Māori “iwi” (tribes), “hapū” (subtribes), and “whanau” (extended families) lay against the British Crown to redress past colonial wrongs (Waitangi Tribunal). To do so, it regards Aotearoa New Zealand citizens not through the neoliberal view of biculturalism – opposing Pākehā to Māori and leaving Kiwi Asians and Pacific Islanders in limbo – but through the frame of “Te Tiriti o Waitangi” which acknowledges the presence of “tangata whenua” (the people of the land, aka: the Māori) and tangata tiriti (people allowed to stay in Aotearoa by the signing of the Treaty). By applying this reading framework, Morris and Wong include Kiwi Asians into tangata tiriti, and give them the same visibility, space, and value as other immigrants like Pākehā, Pasifika, and any migrant and refugee, regardless of their geographic origin.

As former Commonwealth Poet (2016) and New Zealand Poet Laureate (2017-2019), Selina Tusitala Marsh (of Samoan, Tuvaluan, English, Scottish, and French descent) emphasizes in her graphic memoir, *Mophead Tu: The Queen’s Poem* (2020), the ethical question “Where do I stand?” (25, emphasis in the original) that remains crucial in Pacific literature due to the history of colonisation. As a white French scholar, I am “tauiwi” (a foreigner) in Aotearoa New Zealand and the views that I formulate on Kiwi Asian poetry are situated in the margin, even though my daughter and my “whanau” are “tangata tiriti” who belong to this community. As research can be associated with colonialism and Eurocentrism when Western methodologies are applied on non-Western cultures without being challenged (Tuhiwai Smith, 30), I will abide by “kaupapa Māori” (Māori methodologies) to approach the corpus selected for this article in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner. I will also attempt to construct an intercultural dialogue between Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory which originally depicts the impact of the Holocaust on the second and third generations of Jewish survivors and the intergenerational trauma experienced by the New Zealand descendants of anti-Maoist Chinese migrants. The following poems will be analysed: “Girl Warrior, or Watching *Mulan* (1998) in

Chinese with English Subtitles” and “Mother Tongue” by Nina Minya Powles (2020), “Dumplings Are Fake” and “The Capital of My Mother” by Vanessa Mei Crofskey (2020), as well as “My Ukrainian Friend” (2016) and “Leaves” by Lily Ng (2016, 2020). A Kiwi Asian poet of Chinese, Malaysian, and Pākehā descent, Nina Mingya Powles grew up in Wellington and studied in Shanghai for one year, before settling in London. She is well-known for *Magnolia* (2020), a collection of poems which received international acclaim. Lily Ng is a third-generation Chinese New Zealander who also grew up in Wellington. Her grandparents fled from China during the Cultural Revolution – a migration story she recounts in two versions of “Leaves.” One version was published in 2016 in the poetry magazine *Starling* which highlights the work of poets in their early twenties, and the other in the *New Zealand School Journal* in 2020, mostly addressed to teenage students. As for Vanessa Mei Crofskey, she is a descendant of the Hokkien Chinese diaspora who live in Malaysia. She is also of Irish and Polish descent. Her collection of poems, *Shopping List of Small Violences*, was published in 2020.

This article discusses how Kiwi Asian women poets challenge the silencing of their community’s history and how they excavate their cultural trauma from their personal experiences of racism and sexism. After studying how women poets express their exclusion from the public sphere, I will focus on the way they map the migration routes of their female ancestors, before observing how they construct their multicultural and multilingual poems into spaces where they feel at home.

Excluded from the Public Sphere: At the Intersection of Racism and Sexism

Second-generation Chinese New Zealander, K. Emma Ng argues that the anti-Asian sentiment in New Zealand draws a line between ‘Old Asians’ – Kiwi Asians who settled from the middle of the nineteenth century – and ‘New Asians’ – Kiwi Asians who have settled in New Zealand after the 1987 Migration Act that put an end to ethnic quotas on migrants. The history of exclusion endured by ‘Old Asians’ can explain the dearth of publication from this ethnic minority. In 2017, Tina Makereti shed light on the long absence of Kiwi Asian poets from the “wharenuī” of Aotearoa New Zealand literature. A “wharenuī” is a communal house where Māori meet to discuss and celebrate events. Imagining what the “wharenuī” of literature would look like and which writers would have their statues inside leads Makereti to name Pākehā and Māori ancestor writers as sources of inspiration. Yet, she notes that “[w]e’d have our other migrant storytellers too — including the Chinese ancestors who came to Aotearoa as early as many of our Pākehā forebears. And this is a harder story to tell” (n.pag.). Questioning the conspicuous silence of the second ethnic minority from the poetic past of Aotearoa, Makereti can eventually name two men of letters, Chiu Kwok Chun who worked as an editor, and Alison Wong’s grandfather, James Wong, whose poetry has never been recovered. As mentioned in the introduction, 2021 saw the publication of the first anthology of Kiwi Asian poetry, *A Clear Dawn*. This anthology was clearly overdue since the first Chinese migrants were invited to work in the Otago goldmines in 1866 by the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce (Li 5-6). Although Asian Americans had written poetry in Hawai’i since the middle of the nineteenth century (Park 156, 159), the first Asian American collection of poems, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, was published by Frank Chin in 1974. In Australia, the first Chinese worker arrived in 1818 (National Museum Australia) and the first Asian Australian poetic anthology, *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets*, dates back to 2013. Yu argues that the belated publication of Asian Australian poetry is significant as it highlights the invisibility of this community in a country whose motto had relied on the White Australia Policy for several decades (*Diasporic Poetics* 72) – a comment which can also be applied to the Land of the Long

White Cloud.¹

Aotearoa New Zealand was the first country in the world to grant women the right to vote in 1893, regardless of their ethnicity and their social class, thanks to the work of suffragettes led by Kate Sheppard.² This ground-breaking decision is central to the perception that people have of New Zealand as being a class-free and racist-free society, as well as a haven for women’s rights. However, Kiwi Asians have often been targeted by hate crimes (Sibley et al. 34; Sibley and Ward 705), despite being the second ethnic minority after Māori and before Pacific Islanders, representing 15% of the total population (Stats NZ). In fact, anti-Asian sentiment dates back to the end of the nineteenth century and played a part in the construction of a cultural trauma for the Kiwi Asian community. Jeffrey Alexander explains that

[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (1)

Asian New Zealanders’ cultural trauma relies on a long history of discrimination. From 1881, the number of Chinese migrants was limited by a quota and they were the only migrants who had to pay a poll tax. From 1907 on, Chinese migrants had to undergo a language proficiency test in English before entering the country. Even if they passed the test, they were barred from the New Zealand citizenship until 1952, which prevented them from voting, being elected, and participating in the politics of the country (Didham and Rocha 589; J. Lee 61-77; Ip, “Māori-Chinese Encounters” 232, “Chinese” n.pag.). From the 1890s, fears of miscegenation automatically deprived Pākehā women of their citizenship when they married an Asian New Zealander (Lee 77). At the turn of the nineteenth century, eugenics theories and the ‘Yellow Peril’ campaigns³ became widespread in settler colonies and helped to justify segregationist and exclusionary measures to secure white supremacy (Bartholomew; Schlund-Vials 197-198; J. Lee 59-61; Song 4; Ip, “Māori-Chinese Encounters” 235). One had to wait until 2002 for Labour Prime Minister Helen Clarke to officially apologise for the discriminatory measure of the poll tax to the descendants of Chinese migrants in 2002 (J. Lee 66). Clarke’s apology led to the creation and restoration of memory sites to commemorate the living conditions of Chinese gold diggers in the South Island (Keown, “Sojourners” 11). Two sites, Arrowtown and “Canton,” can be visited, and they inspired poets Alison Wong into writing “Chinese Settlement, Arrowtown” (2002) and “Round Hill” (2006), and Vanessa Mei Crowskey: “What’s the PH Balance of Yin + Yang?” (2020).

Like “Old Asians,” “New Asians” have also endured their share of racism. After the opening of the national borders to any migrant in the late 1980s, anti-Asian voices rose in the press and among politicians to denounce what they called an “inv-Asian” (Ip, “Māori-Chinese Encounters” 242; Crowskey, “PH Balance” Stanza 14), denigrating Asian migrants as economic thieves (Sibley and Ward). Asian New Zealanders were blamed for the housing inflation that affected the country’s economy in the 2010s (E. Hunt; Braddock; K. E. Ng), and of the Covid 19 pandemic in the 2020s (Morris and Wong). It is for this reason that Anti-Asian sentiment resonates in “Dumplings Are Fake” by Vanessa Mei Crowskey. In this poem, Crowskey challenges the objectification of her physical appearances, which turns her into a sexual object

¹ Aotearoa is translated as “the Land of the Long White Cloud.” The origin of this name is unclear, yet it is commonly believed to be a reference to Polynesian history as this meteorological phenomenon could have been used by Polynesian ancestors to direct their canoes and spot the North Island of Aotearoa.

² Kate Sheppard was the leading figure of the Suffragette movement in New Zealand. Her petition for women’s right to vote received more than 30,000 signatures (Archives of New Zealand).

³ The ‘Yellow Peril’ campaigns occurred at the end of the nineteenth century in many settler colonies as in the United States, reflecting the violence anti-Asian sentiments could take in white supremacist discourses.

existing for Pākehā male pornographic desire. She writes:

my best representation is in a section of pornhub
 where all the skinny Asian girls and the mixed chicks don't speak
 have big tits, and white men cum all over their faces

i posted about it on snapchat the other day
 then a dude screenshotted my next selfie (lines 23-27)

Her poem fills in the empty space of her assumed or presumed silence due to her gender and ethnicity (line 24). It can be read as a crafted answer to the consumption of her image on social networks. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills warn against the way racism and sexism intertwine. For them, “[g]ender is always racialised” (4). In fact, Asian girls are subjugated on several levels due to their gender, ethnicity, and age. Settler societies tend to classify Asian women in two categories. They are often perceived as either “dragon ladies” or “subdued obedient girls” (Wallinger-Schorn 16-17; Yamada 32; Wang and Yu 34; Adams 14; Sen 61). Crowskey challenges this sexualised portrayal of herself as a woman of pleasure. She draws an opposition between the way in which Pākehā men imagine her with the way she perceives herself to be. She mocks their expectations of her as an illiterate whore by mimicking the language they imagine she uses because of her Asian origins: “he tell me to say something in my language” (line 12). The grammatical error on the verb in this line marks the linguistic deficiencies a Pākehā man expected Crowskey to have in English because of her Asian features. This racial prejudice is further emphasized by the man’s exotic desire to hear her communicate in an Asian language, although English is her mother tongue as she explains in “The Capital of My Mother,” as she does not speak her ancestral language. Her male interlocutor re-enacts the colonial bias constructing Asian migrants as ‘deficient’ in their use of the English language (Song 5), making them sound foreign in the Anglosphere – a prejudice members of my “whānau” (family) still endure in Aotearoa despite being born in this country with English as their first language. To the voyeuristic and demeaning vision of herself as a voiceless sexy mixed-Asian girl, Crowskey ironically opposes her view of her aggressors as racist and sexist fools who need an education. In “Girl Warrior, or: Watching *Mulan* (1998) in Chinese with English Subtitles,” Nina Mingya Powles also contests the racist sexualisation of her own body under the Pākehā male gaze. She recalls an incident which was meant as a compliment although it came out like a racist and sexist slur: “once a guy told me mixed girls are the most beautiful / because they aren’t really white / but they aren’t really Asian either” (part 2 line 4). The Pākehā man’s comment paradoxically imprisons his interlocutor in a “neither/nor” imaging which erases Powles’ hyphenated identity. Her dual ancestry which can be conceived as additional value in terms of culture, language, and knowledge, is negated through this white man’s reductive view of her. His words reveal instead his own sexual fantasy of her as an Asian doll with a white girl’s curves – as though Powles’ body was a collage composed of seemingly incompatible fragments. This imaginative operation in reality negates her identity to create a new object more pleasing to the Western male gaze. The survivor of insidious trauma – defined by Michelle Hand as that “which results from recurrent initial traumatic experiences linked with power imbalances due to sexism” (2133), and, in the case of Kiwi Asian girls, racism – Powles uses poetry to anchor her own mixed-Kiwi Asian girl body in the public sphere, in her own terms. Her poem, “Girl Warrior,” is indeed constructed on a paradox. Although the poem is autobiographical, the middle of the poem – which recalls a dialogue between the poet and her mother – emphasises the poet’s inability to narrate her own life: “*Why don’t you ever write about yourself / and I didn’t know why / either*” (part 4 line 14, italics in the original). The mother’s voice is heard in the poem via the italicization of the words she formulates, inviting readers to mix sight and sound in a synesthetic approach to poetry. The mother-daughter dyad is described as central to the

formation of the poet’s identity. Powles grew up in translation as her mother’s use of English was altered by her first language, Chinese. Part 4 line 16 reads “*Shut off the light / as my mother and other Chinese mothers say.*” Mixing up sound and sight in her use of the fixed phrase “switch off the light,” as though darkness was experienced as silence and light as sounds, Powles’s mother transmitted to her daughter a linguistic legacy marked by relativity, subjectivity, and poetic innovation. Raised in a linguistic world in which words can be substituted for others and still convey their original meaning, Powles lets the in-betweenness of her ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage surface in her text, as if in homage to her m/Other, whose alterity is at the core of her motherhood. The poet sees New Zealand society differently, through the filter of her ancestral language and culture. In describing her childhood identification with the Disney character of Mulan, Powles notes that she could not compete with this whitening and idealised version of a Chinese princess. When the heroine embodies fragility with her “thin waist / hardly any breasts” (part 1 line 3) and “with very small wrists” (part 2 line 8), her own body, by comparison, looks ‘un-Asian’ as she does not fit in with the stereotype of the “China doll” (Adams 14): “unlike me with my thick legs / and too much hair that doesn’t stay,” part 1 line 4). Confessing her love for food, Powles explains that her only exploits happen in poems (part 3). As a result, she does not need to save her motherland like the girl warrior in order to have a role to play in the public sphere of Aotearoa. Crafting poetry is the weapon which inserts her poetic apprehension of life into the literary world of New Zealand, armed as she is with the double consciousness of a multilingual and multicultural speaker.

Mapping the Migration Routes of the Women Poets’ Female Ancestors

Asian Americans changed status in the 1960s when they were referred to as the “model minority” in the US. This term, coined in 1966 by William Peterson, gave this community more power and credibility than African Americans and Latinos without giving them full equality with white Americans (Wallinger-Schorn 19). The “model minority” discourse actually rehearses the colonial phenomenon of mimicry described by Homi K. Bhabha, who issued a warning against the construction of the ‘mimic man’ whom he defines as “the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English” (“Mimicry” 87). As Justine Tinkler et al. note, being perceived as “honorary whites” does not make Asian Americans white, which therefore denies them racial equality. In the 1980s, Kiwi Asians started to be construed as the model minority too, which have led other New Zealanders to imagine them as economic migrants who were in competition with Māori and Pasifika for jobs (Sibley and Ward 708; Sibley et al. 32; Ip, “Māori-Chinese Encounters” 241). However, this racist prejudice conceals the fact that many Asian New Zealanders were political refugees who were not recognised so as not to encumber international political alliances and economic markets. The poems of the corpus depict Asian women as taking an active role in migrating from their country of origin to their host country to escape from authoritarian regimes. Madeleine Hron describes “immigrant pain” as “a cumulative series of traumatic events resulting from the immigration process itself, past violence and/or socioeconomic and cultural disparity in the receiving country” (28). The trauma endured by the women poets’ mothers and grandmothers is enmeshed in an intergenerational and cultural trauma which they unconsciously transmitted to their descendants. Lily Ng’s grandparents experienced the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976) before fleeing to New Zealand. Powles and Crowskey’s maternal families moved to Malaysia then to New Zealand to escape from anti-Chinese xenophobia. I would also argue that Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory can provide a pertinent analysis of “Leaves” by Lily Ng and “The Capital of My Mother” by Vanessa Mei Crowskey. Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and

cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (“Introduction” 5). Originally formulated to address the intergenerational trauma that the second generation of Holocaust survivors experienced through second-hand contact with the Shoah, it seems that the concept of postmemory can also be applied to analyse the fragmented transmission of the cultural trauma that is specific to the Kiwi Asian community.

Both versions of “Leaves” can be read as variations of the same trauma narrative, which bears witness to the haunting character of the family story of Lily Ng. The poet focuses on her grandmother’s decaying body following her experience of the Cultural Revolution in China. Along with her husband, the latter was forced to leave an urban lifestyle for a life working in the fields as a labourer. In this sense, Ng’s poem could be read as an instance of “*littérature des cicatrices*” (Sakai et al. 13, 16), that is to say: “scar literature” (Branigan), a genre which surfaced in the 1970s as a form of dissident literature in China to testify to the cultural trauma engendered by Mao’s dictatorship. Both versions of the poem are identical at the start, until line 7, “The regime was relentless,” which signals a shift in the recollection of the family trauma. From then on, the 2016 text notes the evolution of the grandma’s skin tone, shifting from a “pallid” tint (line 1) to a “brown-ochre” hue (line 8). Like a leaf, the woman changed colour, prematurely reaching her autumn years due to the radical change in her lifestyle. To escape from a life of physical exploitation and intellectual brainwashing, she swam from the continent to Hong Kong, an exploit which is nonetheless recounted in subdued unheroic tones although she risked her life during her passage to freedom: “a single dark leaf / smuggled away on the Hong Kong current” (lines 12-13). Without any transition, stanza 4 sets the scene in Wellington, to commemorate the birth of the poet’s father, and then her own, while stanza 5 emphasises the impact the Communist propaganda had on the matriarch’s health as she developed cancer in her later years. I wish to posit the idea that the grandmother’s cancer can be interpreted as a metaphor for the effect that Mao’s dictatorship had on the Chinese population. The grandmother’s herstory is presented as the poet’s heritage and her chronic pain as the result of political repression. The 2020 version differs from the 2016 text as it uses line 7 (i.e. “The regime was relentless”) to end the second stanza, before moving on to a postmemory that the poet had of her grandmother working in the fields in China during the Cultural Revolution. Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory in these terms:

‘Postmemory’ describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (1)

Following this interpretative frame, I consider that the stories Ng’s female ancestor told her of that repressive era marked the poet’s memory as though it were her own, giving her the strength to testify to the forced exodus and indoctrination of the intelligentsia in Canton (stanza 3). The last three stanzas take place in Wellington after the poet’s birth, creating a gap in the timeline which focuses on the relationship between the grandmother and her grandchild. The poem ends on a contrast between a recollection of the famine endured in China (line 22) and the profusion of food the family can afford in New Zealand (lines 24-25). In both poems, Ng bears witness to her grandparents’ heroic escape from a dictatorial regime, focusing on the beloved figure of her grandma who transmitted to her the historical trauma she endured during the Cultural Revolution. She opposes the intellectual and physical hunger of her ancestors to a bountiful life in Aotearoa, a land of milk and honey which is yet marred by herstory’s ghosts. Her poem therefore inscribes her ancestors’ journey towards freedom back in the history of New Zealand, a nation represented as a guardian of human rights (National Army Museum/Te Mata Toa).

In an article on the cultural powers of food, Anna Maria Tomczak argues that “[f]or a diaspora, food functions as an identity builder and the crystallising force of collective remembrance” (230). A cultural marker, Asian food gathers several generations around the same table and is a teller of tales, a remembrance. In “The Capital of My Mother”, Vanessa Mei Crofskey expresses her joy at speaking online with her grandmother, who remained in Malaysia, despite them communicating in different languages: “We don’t speak the same language / but we do share the same ocean / when I say noodles she knows exactly what I mean” (stanza 11). Crofskey draws the map of her family history and family bonds as border-crossing. From Kuala Lumpur to Wellington, intergenerational connections are sewn over common cultural markers like Asian food and the Pacific Ocean. Crofskey’s transpacific interpretation of the Pacific Ocean as a geographic, historic, and cultural unifying bond recalls Epeli Hau‘Ofa’s vision of the Pacific as “a sea of islands” (Keown, “Major Authors”), with water being the common denominator of the various islands which compose its vast territory. The woman poet therefore considers that she belongs to “tangata pasifika” (the people of the Pacific Ocean), imagining New Zealand as being enmeshed in a net of meaning-making connections with numerous islands and countries, otherwise mere dots in the Pacific zone. Her self-definition expands the national borders of New Zealand and rejects dubious racialised delineations between Asians, Pasifika, and Māori which were imposed by European colonists, regardless of the settlement history of the Pacific (Ramsay 5). Her relationship with the land of Aotearoa New Zealand is marked by this Pacific reading of her cultural alliances:

They say all rivers flow to sea
I cannot find home except the sense
Of somewhere I can’t reach
I am a migrant’s remembrance
I am a welcome party. (stanza 7)

Playing with the myth of Asians as “perpetual foreigners” (Adams 5; Song 3; Wallinger-Schorn 13), Crofskey feels homeless and possibly without roots. Her family belongs to the Chinese diaspora of Malaysia who, after xenophobic measures had been voted against them,⁴ experienced a second wave of migration to New Zealand. Her family herstory is composed of several migration routes across the Pacific, rendering the idea of a “home country” obsolete. Timothy Yu explains that the Asian diaspora who lives in Anglophone settler colonies should be defined without the concept of “home.” His transpacific perspective draws upon Paul Gilroy’s research on the Middle Passage in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1995) which shows how this maritime space has fashioned the Transatlantic cultures and identities of African slaves’ descendants across several geographic areas. Yu argues that, “[c]onsidered in terms of origins, an ‘Asian diaspora’ would seem almost nonsensical, given the vastness of ‘Asia’ and its status as a Western categorisation that varies in its definition” (*Diasporic Poetics* 13). As a Kiwi Asian, Crofskey is imagined as ‘atopos’ in the Pākehā neoliberal mindset, having no home to go back to and no stable home to stay in. And yet, as “tangata pasifika”, she contributes to the construction of Aotearoa as a nation. When she reads herstory with “kaupapa Māori” (Māori methodologies), the woman poet describes how she evolved from a morally dubious position: “the first house I live in is a transported container / stolen body, claimed land, white heartbeat” (stanza 14) – as she used to live on a land that truly belonged to a Māori iwi, making her dwelling illegal – to an assertion of herself as “tangata pasifika” (a citizen of the Pacific Ocean), living by the seaside and whose migration

⁴ In 1969, racial riots occurred in Malaysia, targeting the Chinese minority. Official figures claim that 196 Chinese Malaysians were killed on 13 May 1969, although estimates from foreign sources argue that there were in fact several hundred casualties from this community that day (Bowie; Asia Foundation).

waves constitute her cultural background.

Constructing Multicultural and Multilingual Poems as Places They Can Call Home

Since they are often denied being from Aotearoa New Zealand because of racial prejudices, Kiwi Asian women settle in their poems instead. Their poetic texts read as “counter-narratives” which Homi K. Bhabha defines as “histories of marginality [that] have been most profoundly enmeshed in the antinomies of law and order – the colonized and women” (*Nation and Narration* 302). Delivered in the public sphere, their poetry reaches beyond a domestic ‘safe space’ which would protect its dwellers from the outside world. Kiwi Asian women indeed carve a poetic “brave space” to inhabit New Zealand’s forum and add their multilingual voices to the democratic conversation, challenging prejudiced discourses formulated against them. Pascale Joubi explains that a literary “brave space” enables the formation of a critical stance that is caring despite disagreements, as its main objective is to improve the life conditions of marginalised groups (n.pag.). When Nina Mingya Powles, Vanessa Mei Crofskey, and Lily Ng interact with Pākehā and Māori literary traditions, they do so from more than simply the standpoint of the historically excluded and silenced Other. They forge instead a poetic space that encompasses the plurality of their cultures and the polyphony of their family herstories.

Acts of translation operate on several levels in the poems of the corpus. The linguistic technique of translating from one (ghost) language to another is the most obvious one. Madeleine Hron argues that “[t]ranslation employs language that is always shadowed by loss – that of an ‘other’ text, an ‘other’ voice, an ‘other’ world” (40). For her, translations always carry the translated language into the translating one, moving meaning from one language to the next while preserving an absence as every language has its own construction and limits. Barriers are not only linguistic; they can also be cultural for multilingual speakers. Translating cultural aspects into English can be arduous when the colonisers’ language has no word to offer to convey philosophical concepts which exist in Asia and the Pacific. Code-switching is a necessary activity and a political act for Kiwi Asian poets if they want to honour the complexity of the world which surrounds them. Monolingualism would be conceived as an atrophy in Aotearoa New Zealand poetry as, in this officially bilingual country, 160 languages are currently spoken every day (The Royal Society of New Zealand/Te Apārangi). The colonial powers of the English language (Pihama 357) are re-assessed as the insertion of Chinese and “te reo Māori” (the Māori language) alongside English can be read as an act of defiance and resistance against assimilationist practices. In this context, trauma-telling could be analysed as a form of translation. Having to inscribe cultural, interpersonal, intergenerational, and insidious forms of trauma in poetry leads Kiwi Asian women writers to translate their various cultures and languages via the medium of English and the format of poems. Michelle Hand argues that poetry writing is therapeutic, especially for trauma survivors: “autobiographical poetry offers opportunities for closure and new definitions of self, otherwise obscured through trauma” (2130). Kiwi Asian poetry can be read as survivor poetry, whose poetic language, form, and rhythm, sound, and meaning appease both writers and their audience. Trauma-telling is intertwined with trauma-reading as survivors need an audience to make sense of what happened to them (Laub; Waldegrave and Tamasese). Poetry offers trauma-tellers the possibility to synthesise trauma in the short and delineated spacetime of the poem. Using poems as “*modus operandi*” to convey traumatic experiences often defined as “unrepresentable” and “unsayable” in Freudian-inspired trauma methodologies (Caruth) allows transpacific Asian writers to inscribe their multilingual voices in democratic debates. In the US, Asian American poet Meena Alexander plays with the etymology of the word “translation”, which in ancient Greek means “to transport across a border” (88), to formulate her own poetics: “[a]rt in a time of trauma, a necessary translation (...). But what if the paste shows, the seams, the fractures? It seemed to

me then (...) that the work of art must use the frame of the real, translating a script almost illegible, a code of traumatic recovery” (87-88). Meena Alexander situates trauma at the heart of her aesthetics, which challenges Roger Luckhurst’ concept of “an aesthetic of trauma” (80) which itself turns trauma literature into a literature of clichés feeding readers’ aesthetic expectations. In Meena Alexander’s approach, poetic language can overcome the linguistic limitations met by trauma survivors because she conceives poetry as another language, thus as a means of translation.

In “Mother Tongue,” Nina Mingya Powles adopts a similar approach to trauma as she dedicates this poem to Hakka, a language spoken in China and in the Chinese diaspora. Her poem tries to capture in the English language the feeling of loss that she experiences when thinking about and listening to her ancestral language which she cannot speak. Timothy Yu notes that “[l]anguage learning, and the loss of the ‘mother tongue,’ is a frequent theme in Asian American poetry” (“Asian American Poetry” 824) – and, I would argue, in Kiwi Asian poetry as well. The bilingualism of the poem is announced in the title which is written in English and in Chinese logograms. The subtitle “A poem in two voices” highlights the dialogism at stake in the poem, and the words in italics in the poem are English translations of basic words in Hakka (lines 12-13). When translated in italics, Hakka is paradoxically visible but not audible. It is transformed into a ghost language whose presence occupies the poem in English. The realism of the domestic scene in column 1 is balanced by a hypothetical family life in column 2, based on the rewriting of two events: “what if my mother never left this place” (column 2 line 20) and “If I had grown up here” (column 2 line 23). While Powles depicts a conversation that she had with her grandmother in her grandparents’ kitchen on the left side of the poem, the column on the right contains her musings over her multilingual self. The poem takes place in Malaysia, in languages which sound foreign to the speaker who hears Arabic spoken by a muezzin (column 1 line 2) and Hakka by her grandparents (column 1 line 7-8 and line 12). If the meaning of words is beyond her understanding, Powles still perceives the emotions conveyed by these languages. She interprets Muslim prayers as a language of pain (column 1 line 4) and her ancestors’ language as expressing comfort and ease (column 1 lines 7-8). She regrets being unable to communicate in Hakka, “a language so familiar but so far away” (line 8). Well-known and welcoming despite being unknown, this language remains a barrier that she circumvents by using body language to communicate with her elders (column 1 lines 17-19). In the second column which corresponds to Powles’ dream in which she rewrites her family’s story, the poet is not a Kiwi Asian girl anymore but a Chinese Malaysian (column 2 line 20). She imagines what she would have looked had her mother decided to stay in Malaysia instead of studying in New Zealand: “I would have different-coloured hair / and different-coloured eyes” (column 2 lines 24-25). She would be fluent in Hakka (column 2 line 26) and “not be trapped / in any language” (column 2 lines 37-38). The poem ends on this note, as though mono-ethnicity and monolingualism would have been a remedy to her constant need for translation from one language, one generation, and one country to the next. The ghostly presence of Hakka inside her poem in English yet dedicated to this language sheds light on Powles’ own poetic voice, composed of several linguistic systems. The unique language that she creates out of her own multilingualism transforms her poem into a “third space” which Homi K. Bhabha describes in these terms: “as an interstitial moment produced through the negotiation of contradiction and ambivalence [the third space] must now be understood as a site of the witness – the work of witnessing – in the stirrings of a consciousness of justice” (“Neighbours” 6). Powles’ poem becomes a site of consciousness from which she bears witness to the cultural trauma of her family herstory. She seems to imagine that life would have been simpler, had she not been born in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, because she cannot rewrite history, she inserts her linguistic herstory into the body of her New Zealand poem and translates the homely feeling she has in Hakka into the English language.

In the poem entitled “My Ukrainian Friend,” Lily Ng delves into her school years. The poetry she crafts creates an intercultural dialogue with Māori literature and myths. As “tangata tiriti,” she and her best friend learnt about the Māori culture in a respectful manner:

We slept in Papatūānuku’s womb,
 woke in darkness.
 We tore the only world we knew in two,
 made a prisoner of the sun and called it Day.
 We slung hooks into the ocean and called it Land. (lines 8-12)

The girls adopted Māori knowledge and identified with heroes of Māori stories. In this passage, Ng refers to Māori Creation Stories, especially the passage when the Earth Mother, Papatūānuku, was separated from her beloved husband, Ranginui, the Sky Father, by their many children whom they kept between their eternal embrace. Their offspring’s emancipation led to the creation of time and of distinct physical and sacred entities, such as the land and the sky. Line 12 mentions Māui’s exploits as the demi-god fished Aotearoa from the Pacific Ocean. The double reference to the land highlights its importance for “tangata whenua” whose “whakapapa” (genealogy) connects to Papatūānuku. “Whenua” is a polysemic word which means “people” and “placenta” in te reo Māori. Customarily, Māori bury the umbilical cord of their newborn babies into the ground, binding a human being with the land of their ancestors. Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa, Yurok, Karuk, and of the Hoopa Valley tribe in Northern California) notes that “Native knowledge, and by extension Native literatures and the oral tradition, were attacked because of their power to resist colonization. Stories were and are how Indigenous peoples define and redefine their sovereignty, spaces, cultures and knowledge” (6). By acknowledging Māori literature, beliefs, customs, and culture as the norm in a New Zealand educational setting, Ng abides by Māori sovereignty, which is one of the defining notions of Aotearoa as a nation in “Te Tiriti o Waitangi.” As “tangata tiriti,” Ng and her Ukrainian friend are shown learning from the Indigenous people of Aotearoa. The girls position themselves as witnesses to the historical trauma endured by the Māori due to colonisation. They empathise with the epidemic triggered by their first contact with European settlers: “We cried over smallpox scars” (line 13). They identify with the casualties of the Musket Wars⁵ which took place between 1818 and 1840: “[we] picked musket balls from our bones” (line 14). Nuclear testing in the Pacific is also questioned for its lethal consequences: “and when they split the atom / felt skeletons stir” (lines 15-16). Lily Ng therefore sides with Indigenous peoples of the Pacific against every form of colonisation, including the influence of the American consumer society over contemporary lifestyles. During the British Empire, New Zealand was imagined as ‘God’s own country’ (Pausé et al. 86; Salesa 12), a place for Christians to build a new Jerusalem. Yet, the “New World” mentioned in line 18 is in fact a supermarket, the temple of Pākehā consumerism. By contrast, Lily Ng mentions her “red cheongsam” (line 21) as a symbol of her femininity fashioned by her ancestral culture. This epic poem which tells of two schoolgirls’ imaginary adventures into the multicultural landscape of Aotearoa transmits Māori and Chinese literary, cultural, and historic references via the colonisers’ language. Kiwi Asian poetry succeeds in challenging a status quo which is inherited from colonial times. Nina Mingya Powles and Lily Ng encrypt the linguistic presence of other cultures belonging to Aotearoa into the English language by translating their cultural traumas in their poetic arts.

To conclude, Kiwi Asian poetry may have been published only recently but the cultural trauma

⁵ The Musket Wars were orchestrated by British merchants who sold rifles to Māori iwi (tribes), enticing intertribal conflicts. An estimated 20,000 Māori died and the Moriori population in Rēkohu, the Chatham Islands, was decimated as a result (Watters; Keane).

that poets from this community write down has been forged by more than a century and a half of systemic discrimination. Nina Mingya Powles and Vanessa Mei Crofskey condemn the racialised sexist comments that they have had to endure over the years which ultimately led to insidious trauma. With Lily Ng, they testify to their female ancestors’ migration pain, contesting racist readings of Kiwi Asians as economic migrants when many settled in Aotearoa New Zealand as unofficial political refugees. Adapting Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory to the poems’ contexts, I have shown that the intergenerational transmission of historical traumas did not occur from the first to the second generation as was mostly studied with Holocaust survivors, but from the grandmother to the granddaughter, which emphasizes the way family herstory defines Kiwi Asian women poets’ identity. Their poems, translating trauma into the British colonisers’ language, bear witness to the historical exclusion of their community from a Pākehā main/malestream society. To challenge the prejudice towards them, women poets abide by “kaupapa Māori,” inscribing their presence in Aotearoa New Zealand, not as “perpetual foreigners,” but as “tangata tiriti.” Their poems build a literary brave space and a sort of “home” from which women poets can criticise the status quo and the lingering remnants of colonisation. Kiwi Asian poetry, as a form of trauma-telling, is therefore a democratic medium to rewrite the part played by Asian New Zealanders in the construction of Aotearoa New Zealand as a nation.

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Marine Berthiot

Marine Berthiot was awarded a DPhil in Aotearoa New Zealand Literature at The University of Edinburgh in December 2022. She teaches at The University of Lyon and is an associate member of the LCE Laboratory (Laboratoire Lettres et Civilisations Étrangères, Université Lumière Lyon 2). Her doctoral thesis dealt with the representations of girlhood trauma in Aotearoa New Zealand literature written by women. She specialises in Trauma Studies, Childhood Studies, Gender Studies, Indigenous Studies, Pacific Literature, and Magdalene art and literature from the Anglophone world. Marine Berthiot a obtenu son doctorat en Littérature d'Aotearoa Nouvelle-Zélande à l'Université d'Edimbourg en décembre 2022. Elle enseigne à l'Université de Lyon et est membre associée au Laboratoire LCE (Laboratoire Lettres et Civilisations Étrangères, Université Lumière Lyon 2). Sa thèse aborde les représentations des traumatismes de l'enfance au féminin dans la littérature d'Aotearoa (Nouvelle-Zélande) rédigée par des femmes. Ses recherches s'orientent autour des études sur le trauma, l'enfance, le genre, les Littératures Indigènes, les Littératures du Pacifique, ainsi que l'art et la littérature des Magdaléennes dans le monde anglophone.