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## **Dislocation Nation: Russell Leong's Nomads**

Russell Leong is a poet of many migrations. The term “immigrant” applies to his family’s journey from Asia to America, but that is only one kind of immigration. Movement is at the heart of Leong’s works—from the fierce Los Angeles highways to the quiet of a Buddhist temple, he seeks the still place in the midst of turmoil. He dedicates his poetry book, *The Country of Dreams and Dust*, to “nomads,” and the epigraph for the first section of poems is taken from an anonymous immigrant who had faced Angel Island Immigrant Station, a “traveler in wind and dust.” The immigrant may adopt a new address, but that does not mean that the past is forgotten.

Nomadic experiences often impact the nomad’s journey and contribute to a deeper awareness of identity. Leong’s work is marked by the presence of Buddha, the still point in traffic jams, love affairs, hate crimes, and lonely nights. Buddha is also related to the Asian immigrant’s pre-American life. In America, Buddhist temples exist, dwarfed by the icons and meeting places of Christianity. The speaker in the first poem in *The Country of Dreams and Dust* addresses Buddha who says: “I did not find you, Gautama / Until I passed my forty-second year./ May the Word that gleams/ In the center be yours.” Buddha’s “Word” is at the heart of all experience, yet in the mayhem of American life that Word is difficult to hear.

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In his stories in *Phoenix Eyes*, Leong's characters are often in motion—leaving one culture and adopting another, at home in neither. Some want to get free of attachments, free from death and rebirth, yet the harder they struggle, sometimes the more caught they become. Finding an identity as a nomad, a wanderer in the physical and the spiritual realms, is a challenge. As Mr. Hao says to Tom in the story “Where Do People Live Who Never Die?,” “Identities are always more complex than they appear.” They are complex—and changing. Identities given at birth may not satisfy and for some, particularly gays and lesbians, discovering and redefining the self is a lifetime's work. Especially in his stories, gay characters have to face the complexity of their identities, as Alec says in “Samsara,” “as we pulled harder, we discovered the ropes that bound us.” One's own identity is interconnected with others, particularly other gay people.

In his forward to the anthology *On A Bed of Rice: An Asian American Erotic Feast*, Leong says this of eroticism: “For me, eroticism is the fruit born of the delicate tension between the repression and the expression of sexual desire.” An erotic life, then, is also nomadic. Repression and expression, two seemingly opposing states, are linked. Buddhism teaches that escape from desire is necessary to attain Enlightenment, and Leong's characters can relish desire or withdraw from it. Sexuality does not exist apart from other elements of identity—including class, gender, and ethnicity. It's impossible to pluck out one part of the self without other parts sticking to it.

Perhaps, then, to escape from desire would be escaping from these other defining features of the self. Such an escape would be temporary. The speakers in Leong's poems and characters in his stories are not able to compartmentalize their identities. And who they are is not stagnant—the self swirls, speeds up, slows down, and swirls again. Leong claims an identity as a gay man which is woven into his identity as an Asian American who was born in 1950 and grew up in San Francisco's Chinatown.

In his preface to the 1994 “Dimensions of Desire” issue of the magazine he edits, *Amerasia Journal*, he says, “I think my experiences were typical for an Asian American: at most, I was a voyeur on the edges of sexuality.” One part of the

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puzzle isn't larger than another; all parts are necessary to make a whole.

The self is more fluid, not fixed and dead. In "Eclipse," section seven from "The Country of Dreams and Dust," the speaker says that "Every part/ Has day and night/ By turns." The self stays in flux even if parts of the self, such as sexual orientation and race, are more fixed. Desire in another can "desire or diminish him." The cycle of birth and rebirth continues, enacted not just when we die but also as we live. One more turn awaits. In his story "Eclipse," Leta, the transgendered, pre-op Afro-Asian American, says that "Sexuality is like an eclipse. Shadow over light. Moon over the sun. Interconnected electrons." She speaks in simile, not biology. Sexuality is a union, brief, like an eclipse, yet it can make our interconnectedness more clear.

In his poem "Aerogrammes," the speaker remembers a trip he took to Guangdong, China, in 1984. It was hard to find his relatives; among the native Chinese, he was the outsider, unfamiliar with the daily life of this culture in which he still had family. Back in America, he is the outsider looking in. Hoping to get a gift of cigarettes for relatives in China, he ends up buying two cartons of Chinese cigarettes and two of American, suggesting the split of his own heritage. As he tries to find his father's old home, he goes "Forward and backward" and is, almost incredibly, recognized by the relatives.

After receiving the first aerogramme, he remembers how his relatives wanted to know his marital status as well as that of his brothers—the central piece of elicited information. By the third aerogramme, the speaker claims to have split vision: a Chinese self and an American self. The fourth aerogramme confronts him with his Chinese relatives' desire to see him again. They would like to help him meet a woman so he can start a family and do not consider the possibility that doing so does not interest him. Homosexuality doesn't fit in with the plans.

In the fifth aerogramme, the speaker decides—briefly—that he can cut himself off from his Chinese heritage. He describes family bonds as a "fallen branch." The family tree cannot hold

together, so it is better to swear it off, be free of it. If only it were that simple! Having made that decision, the poem ends with him waiting for the next aerogramme. He cannot be as they want him to be—married—but he cannot take the fallen branch and toss it in the trash either. The past will not be done with.

Leong connects race with sexuality in his own experience, claiming that “As an Asian American I have found my sexuality entangled with race. Race and racism are intertwined with desire-and images of desire. He was born two years before Asians in America were naturalized. Many states did not allow Asians to marry whites. Moreover, generations of Asians who had come to America in the late nineteenth century could not bring spouses because of the exclusion laws. To survive in the new culture demanded a strong work ethic; the traditional heterosexual family model fit in with that ethic. Asian Americans who didn’t fit the model were often suspect, strange, both in their own culture and in the culture in which they were living.

A paradox surfaces. On the one hand, American culture eroticizes the Asian as mysterious and exotic. On the other hand, the Asian American man is essentially a gelding, the sexless Hop Sing or Charly Chan, unthreatening and neutered, or a generation later, kung fu fighters. Asian American woman are represented as passive, more like dolls than people, turned into white male fantasy. In the foreword to *Asian American Sexualities*, he says that “some Asian Americans themselves view same-sex sexuality as a sign of western decadence.” Images of Asian Americans in films, including pornography, are usually created for white males. Their desire is paramount—it’s where the money is. For Leong, the liberation politics of the sixties and seventies offered alternate ways for both Asian American men and women to think of sexual and racial identity. He learned in 1968 that “there was no chance of individual liberation without societal liberation.”

A reality of growing up Asian American is suggested in his poem “A Ride to the Ocean” where a man says: “Get back alla you gooks/ To where you came from.” The “gook” is perceived as a threat, a something rather than a someone, to be dominated and vanquished. In the title poem of *The Country*

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of Dreams and Dust, the speaker's observations are woven in with quotes from the Reverend I.E. Condit's *English and Chinese Reader* (1882), a book for missionaries who were attempting to convert Asian Americans to Christianity and to make them speak English. The speaker compares the migrants to mosquitoes—numerous and annoying to the rest of the culture. The America that some of them thought would be “the soft breast of a green island” becomes the country of dreams and dust. The missionaries, empowered by the state and the approval of the culture, do not fully see them as people. “Souls fall to missionaries/ who charm their way inland.” Like a city being overtaken by an invading army, the souls fall. The missionaries believe they are raising these souls, making them more fully human—in other words, like them.

The Asian American kids grow up learning how to forget. Memories of Asia have to be suppressed, Christ supplanting Buddha, English supplanting Chinese. In one horrific scene, a Presbyterian minister in Chinatown sexually abuses the young Asian American boys. And “No one hears the fear.” Inevitably, in this silence, terrible events become inevitable, including the story of Vincent Chin who was thought to be Japanese and brutally assaulted. He's remembered in the “Ideographs” section, a casualty of white supremacy.

Dana Takagi says in her essay “Maiden Voyage,” “many of us experience the worlds of Asian American and gay America as separate places—emotionally, physically, intellectually.” Both are identities but neither fully defines the other. What are the connecting rooms between these separate places?

The AIDS epidemic, rather than evoking compassion for those who suffer and die, creates more silence, both in the Asian American community and outside of it.

In Asian families, you just disappear.  
 Your family rents a small room for you.  
 They feed you lunch.  
 They feed you dinner.  
 Rice, fish, vegetables.

Disappearing--another way of saying that one never existed, that one is an embarrassment. The family may not abandon but it cannot face the reality. Leong's story "Phoenix Eyes" re-examines this same idea and includes the same kind of lines and images shown in "Aloes." The narrator claims that in Asian families "[t]hey simply do not call AIDS by its proper name: any other name would do—cancer, tuberculosis, leukemia. Better handle it for yourself, keep it within the family. Out of earshot." AIDS often brings up images of non-marital sexuality and drugs, someone whose behavior has made them seem less than fully human. Such a response from the family mirrors much of the society at large where someone who has AIDS is still often considered an outcast, someone who gets cordoned off from others and forgotten.

In his story "Daughters," women often become outcasts because of gender. Haishan's father, an angry, controlling man, favors her brothers over her. She is little more than an object to him, essentially the way he views his wife. His sons get the best food while Haishan and her mother eat leftovers. To pay off her father's debt, Haishan is forced into prostitution. From childhood on, her own feelings are disregarded—her mother tries to stand up for her daughter, but the father's power is complete. He beats his wife and sees his daughter as financial salvation no matter what the cost to her.

In Auntie's house, a place of prostitution, Haishan is raped and trapped. Returning home isn't an option. She has been turned into an object and comes to this conclusion: "a person was imprisoned by the greed of men, or the greed of women. What was the difference?" For Haishan there is no way out from this prison.

When she reunites briefly with her mother, she sees that both she and her mother are whores—her mother services one man while she services many. Both women, then, have identities which are bent to the will of males. What power she gets is when she learns what men need and how to satisfy that need—but it is a temporary power, one which will not rescue her.

When she finds one client who she feels listens to her (except for her mother no one has ever listened to her—she's

irrelevant) she hopes that he can change her life, but he's a liar and a user too, and she is left obliterated again in "America... a country of dreams and dust." Her dreams can never be more than dust. As the wife of one of the houses of prostitution where Haishan works says of her (Asian) prostitutes: "You beauties are helping to save the Asian family. Men can live peacefully at home because here they can take care of their needs." The women aren't women—they're "beauties," creatures defined by male desire. The implication is that straight men aren't satisfied in their marital lives. What they have bores them and they want a living doll, a blank pair of eyes, a sexual toy. Somehow, this will make the men better family men, but Haishan's father beat his wife and her lover lies and uses her.

In his preface to *On a Bed of Rice*, Leong examines the ways in which Asian-Americans are objectified, props for American sexual desire. He says, "Racist myths and assumptions about smaller stature, smaller penises, smaller eyes—and less sexual and erotic drive—have stymied the development and acceptance of Asian American men as full erotic beings." While the males in "Daughters" are scary and can be vicious, the larger society defines them as small and insignificant. Only in their own homes or among themselves can they feel any sense of power—not good news for the women in their lives.

In the poem "Enter the Dragon 2000," Leong's speaker imagines ruining a Chinese New Year's celebration. He claims at the beginning that "Bruce Lee/ Left us a long time ago/ Kicking the air into architecture/ art and essence." He becomes a fierce destroyer of phony images of Chinese Americans which are no more Chinese than a suburban Chinese fast-food restaurant. He relishes his devastation of the celebration, and before the police come, he's "naked/ Pudgy 50-year-old bowlegged Chinaman/ ... Naked. Essence. Original Architecture." He enters the New Year, not by way of the stereotypes, but naked, freed through his active refusal to be a grinning Hop Sing. The speaker may be "Pudgy," hardly a Bruce Lee, but he will enter the New Year closer to his own Essence. He knows he will pay a price for his rebellion—be held for observation (an ironic comment since

whites have been observing him all his life yet never seeing him), be sued for damages, even have his car impounded.

Yet the poem ends with no apology: "This is the world without the Dragon/ This is the world without Bruce Lee."

Finding the "original architecture" in any life is often a painful struggle. As a gay man, as a gay Asian American man, so many layers of dust have settled on his skin that it is difficult to wipe it all off. In section 8, "Monsoon," in "The Country of Dreams and Dust," the first four lines are: "God made the body/ of dust. The/ Soul is made of/ The breath of God." In section 11, "Clay," the speaker find "I curse my blood, clear before/now spotted by the dust of death." In such a world, his hope is in a spiritual awakening.

The last poem in *The Country of Dreams and Dust*, "Unfolding Flowers, Matchless Flames," suggests a vital new awareness for the nomads to whom the book is dedicated. The blood and cruelty of American culture remain, but the poem ends with the speaker meditating on the words of the Sifu, a Buddhist monk, who says in section six, "Each day, dust gathers/ upon us; each day,/ we forget his [the Buddha's] face." The peace, the balance that the speaker connects with in the Temple, can sustain him as he moves back into the world of freeways and carnage.

America, then, can never be home for these nomads. Too much bloody dust covers them. They must keep moving to find a place beyond the stereotypes, beyond the fixed images. On-ramps, malls, and a history written by oppressors cannot lead these nomads to a safe space. The journey to re-see the Buddha's face is not a sentimental affirmation of religion but a journey toward survival and sanity. In section four, the Sifu says "Americans bombed Baghdad,/ now burn their own cities./ Always what we do returns to us—unfolding flowers, matchless flames." He speaks through simile and suggests that trying to be American, to shed one's self in the hopes of being accepted when acceptance is marked by violence, can only end up in pain. The nomad is doomed to be a wanderer in a land which has no place for him or her. Such a land is dust. A country of dreams...and dust.

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