



A Landscape of Memories

through the music of Hope Lee

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Juro Kim Feliz

N.B. This article is the first installment of "Nomadic Sound Worlds," a four-part series that explores Canadian contemporary music through the lens of present-day global migration. Published in 1999, a collection of essays named Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss (ed. André Aciman) informs and inspires this project, with trajectories branching out from related themes including mobility, displacement, loss, reconciliation of polarized truths, and invention of selves. In this regard, the series will feature selected immigrant Canadian composers whose musical worlds collide with various personal stories of immigration.

The ice storm of Toronto in mid-April 2018 melted into windy rainfall in the state of New York, as a cold front descended down south of the Canadian border. Before the eventual downpour, I and everyone else in New York City were as grateful as ever for having a taste of its warmest spring weather so far, even if it lasted just half a day. My mother warned me during chats about extreme weather conditions back in Toronto, as if to discourage me from coming home. I reasoned out that, as all transportation companies normally do, it will be the bus company's job to cancel trips whenever they see fit. Regardless of anything, I'm meant to be bound for home in our chaotic but cozy Toronto apartment, and that inevitable fact won't change unless necessary.

And thus the foggy landscape whizzed by, progressing from the suburbia of Jersey City towards the vast upstate New York countryside south of Lake Ontario. The hours ticked endlessly, and conversations faded in and out while the US-Canada border loomed beyond the horizon. Save for one lone passenger who was held off for some time while crossing, the passage was safe and sound. Past the thick brick walls of bureaucracy and state sovereignties, I saw the sign that says, "Welcome to Ontario (More to discover)." Even as a recent transplant from the Philippines—four years now, to be exact—the message emanated a welcoming gesture for me to dive easily into the comforts of familiarity and belonging. After all, there is no denial that North America has been home for Indigenous communities, temporary residents, immigrants, and native-born Canadian and American citizens alike.

In her discussion of Filipino immigration in the United States, Yen Le Espiritu elucidates the notion of home as “both an imagined and an actual geography,”¹ revealing that we should think of places as intertwined webs of networks and circuits transcending beyond mere physical sites like apartments or neighbourhoods. If domestic spaces are products of how we imagine our past and future selves, one simply draws out memories to encourage home making within diasporic contexts. Strikingly, my Toronto residence contains disjunctured efforts to build home away from the one I’m very intimate with. Sounds of Filipino news programs from my mother’s mobile phone blend in with the omelettes and Canadian bacon I cook for brunch. Mexican chicken *fajita*, Filipino *adobong manok*, or the occasional lamb shoulder roast make it in the dinner menu, while I converse with my mother in Filipino about her concerns as a care provider within Ontario’s home child care program. Video calls with family and friends, mainly from the Philippines, also disrupt the way we create what we call our “Canadian” home. Even feeble attempts to participate in political arenas can wield a different beast, revealing ideals and decisions splattered within an imaginary landscape as they blur out boundaries between being “transnational” and “local.”

Born and raised in Egypt, American writer André Aciman offers a different story about home. New York’s **Straus Park** was his anchor in negotiating the complexity and mystery of his displacement. Nestled in an intersection of four streets within Upper Manhattan’s hustle and bustle, this small patch of green space served as a first-hand witness of Aciman’s search for affinity and belonging within a cascading array of foreign landscapes. Throughout the nostalgia he divulged in his essay named “Shadow Cities,”² the thought of home takes shape as he navigates memories: shadows of Alexandria and the European places he visited, histories of the land he now resides in, and memories of Mrs. Danziger and pianist Kurt Appelbaum with their intimate, albeit exiled, musical soirées at 105th Street. All of these make New York City a mirror of one’s homeland in the midst of other mirrors. It is quite intriguing then to see that all shadows reflect a sense of liminality, being neither here nor there, capturing a snapshot of a place at the same time that we learn to let it go.



An 80s era headshot of composer Hope Lee from the CMC photo collection. Photo Credit: Carole Segal.

Interestingly, Canadian contemporary music composer **Hope Lee** fashioned her own glass mirrors and landscapes in her compositional practice, profoundly projecting human expression into her sense of loss throughout her life. Born and raised in Taiwan, she lost her father in an aerial secret mission in Laos that led to her mother’s disillusionment with the Nationalist government. Escaping the clutches of a war that might enlist and endanger her sons, Lee’s mother decided to uproot the family and move to Canada in 1967. The shadows of losing a father, an invaded homeland, and the comforts of belonging and identity merged into a complex inner universe within her self-imposed isolation. In this regard, Lee’s music is replete with imagery and gestures conveying a vast landscape which

balances the worlds of continuous transformation, inevitable loss, and conscious reclamation of the past. I would even suggest that her compositional practice invokes the act of memorializing memories, histories, and states of being to both narrate and undo the act of “uprooting.” For the purpose of writing this article, I exchanged emails with her about her thoughts of her music and of home, ultimately discovering imagined worlds tucked within her isolated universe.

The Universe within Isolation

“I remember the exact moment I encountered loneliness for the first time. It happened when I was eight. Shortly after my father was reported missing during his mission to Laos as an Air Force pilot, I was stubbornly making the effort to carry on my daily routine, somehow believing such practice of normality would save him...One ritual I had was to get to school early, [and] from the window high up, I could see the Air Force bus below on the street where the officers were picked up...I watched and tried to name each person I could recognize... All the sudden, I came face to face of the fact that I’d never see my father getting on this bus...”

“Afterwards, for years all the way through junior high at a Catholic boarding school, I built a wall to isolate myself... It was a conscious decision based on complex emotions. I was a sensitive child who refused to accept people’s sympathy, took it as pity. I was too proud to talk about my loss ...I desperately hoped that one day I would hear the sudden brake of a jeep outside the house, here through the front door comes in my father, returning home safely as many previous missions...”

“This self-imposed isolation is very different from the one caused by language and cultural barrier once I moved to Canada. In some way the self-imposed isolation had prepared me for it...When creative writing was no longer a sufficient tool for expressing myself because my gradual loss of command of the written Chinese, I started composing.” (Hope Lee, email correspondence to author, May 4, 2018)

It all starts here. We build walls for whatever reason, and we consequently alter the landscape. We encounter a huge disruption in our lives, and we never come out the same beyond each step of the way. Lee’s comments resonate as loneliness and alienation, and are like old friends to me as well—I still find enduring artistic inspiration from musings about distant horizons. No matter how far we go, we are always infinitely distant from horizon lines, never arriving at a point of singularity where we can fully gaze at them. Such is the yearning for escaping the “here and now” to traverse something unfathomable. While worried about the risk of trivializing the topic’s sheer magnitude, I asked Lee to explain her grasp of her isolation, and her ability to condense that into creative symbolism. She pulls up these metaphors: a single musical note within silence, the colour gray, a rock sitting in a running stream, a distant star.

Loss: *Across the veiled distances, von einem fremden Stern*

Hope Lee’s piano work, ***Across the veiled distances***, gives us a dose of these metaphors within her inner world. We hear moments of negotiations with past and present, revealing a process of transformation while losing something as a result. Contained within a multimedia project called *one thousand curves ten thousand colours* with composer and husband David Eagle, the piece forms part of the narrative from Marguerite Yourcenar’s *How Wang Fo Was Saved*. As narrated in the legends, a young disciple abandons his wife and a wealthy life to follow an old master artist. With notions of growth, pursuit, and transformation contained within the story, Lee encapsulates the progression of the piece with these words: “one must lose the old self to become the new.”

across the veiled distances (1996)

I being

Largo

Hope Lee

II growth

Distant, tempo ad lib.

Hope Lee

The first two pages of Hope Lee's Across the veiled distances for solo piano (1996). Starting with three pitches on a section named "Being," the second page calls for "Growth" to explore more iterations of the original structure. The instantaneous existence of "Being" becomes lost in the process.

Perhaps one could even trace this wisdom back to her family's story of transience. Writing an obituary for her mother's death in 2017, Lee narrates that, "from an early life in [Japanese-occupied] Shanghai...to Taipei [exiled from the civil war]...to do-[it]-yourself as a newly-arrived immigrant in Toronto, Mama never looked back, but enjoyed the daily routines and encounters...even considered some as 'little miracles' (brackets my own)." With the onslaught of new beginnings, Lee's teenage years even became entangled in the perpetual need to restart from scratch. Furthermore, mainland Chinese peoples were considered "unwanted" in Taiwan at that time, and the abusive Japanese-style education in public schools³ proved psychologically scarring for her brothers. On the other side of the world, Canada amended its immigration policy in 1967 to eliminate restrictions on race and place of origin. Being part of the very first wave of immigrants from Taiwan then became that opportunity for the family to shed the old skin and grow a new one.

We observe another negotiation with loss in Hope Lee's organ work, **von einem fremden Stern**. Translated from German as "from a distant star," this work was composed in 1993 and dedicated to her composition mentor **Bengt Hambraeus**. The idea of distance becomes significant once again in imagining the universe with Lee's attempts to link entities together within their simultaneous existence. Her deep admiration of Hambraeus sustained an everlasting connection between teacher and student, even beyond the realm of physical time-space upon his demise in 2000. Lee told me that, "when I gaze the twinkling stars at the night sky, I can see his twinkling eyes, full of wisdom, curiosity, compassion. And there seems to be messages sent across the veiled distance."

The first passage from section E of Hope Lee's *von einem fremden Stern* for organ (1993).

A score excerpt from the last pages of Hope Lee's *von einem fremden Stern* for organ (1993). Emerging from a sober recollection of echoes and distances across space-time, repositories of memories fill up with the majestic presence of dense bodies and rapid, shimmering colours from the organ towards the finale.

Looming behind the organ's haunting sounds, Lee says that there is hope after loss. We hear its echoes conveyed across the veiled distances as we search for what was once familiar and what reminds us to move forward. The past and present collide together, and I believe that human migration brings a similar phenomenon among diasporic communities. Looking back to past worlds we once considered real, we cling and connect them to the present, because we genuinely hope that memories will prevent us from forgetting where we are now. Forgetting is a painful thing to conceive, and Lee herself understood this when she related the following: "During the first decade living in Canada, I was able to keep my first language (Mandarin) by writing articles, corresponding to friends in Taiwan, reading Chinese magazines and newspapers frequently. Over the next few decades, those connections and contacts gradually dissipated..."

Connections: Voices in Time

Her mother's death in 2017 created another huge impact in Lee's life. Another shadow has come to pass, and in Lee's own words, she lost "the cause of her being." Perplexed and intrigued with the strength of such words, I pried further into what she meant.

"During this last decade, my mother was the only person I regularly communicated in Chinese, in writing and in speaking," she said. "Without her, my mother tongue has ceased to be a functional language, but becomes a memory. My mother was my last link to the world of my ancestors, the use of Chinese was my last connection to my cultural roots. Without them, I have lost the compass for my journey." She lost the person who gave life to her being, one who carried an ancestral voice guiding her in the present. Like her childhood memories of smelling jasmine flowers at their front yard, of playtime with neighbours, and of watching Peking opera with her grandmother, language itself recedes into memory. Once embodying sounds and ancient poetic images, calligraphy becomes a mere hanging tapestry on the wall. A vibrant space freezes in time like inanimate scribbles in one of her

mother's notebooks, discovered to covertly document Lee's accomplishments as a composer in her mother's handwriting. I can't help but look at people I know who, upon moving to a different land, lost their connections to their native languages early on. We grow new skins and new lives, but lose old ones as a result.

This eroding connection to collective identities brought Lee to compose an eleven-part cycle of works from 1989 to 2011, revolving around the cultural imaginary contained in Chinese literature, history, and ways of thinking and living. One particular piece caught my attention, as it addresses once more the simultaneity of time emerging from multiple spaces. Composed for chamber ensemble and electronics, *Voices in Time* creates an intricate fabric not only of sound colours but also of circuited meanings embedded within Hugh McLennan's [novel](#) of the same name, the soundscape of flowing water in the countryside of Kananaskis (AB), the use of audio and lighting technology to invoke the flow of time, and nature representations in Chinese music. Just like André Aciman's shadow cities within Straus Park, Lee looks into her cultural roots "to fantasize the past in [my] imagination as a bridge to connect the present...to seek for a balance between elements of continuity and elements of change" and project them into a memorial for everyone to witness its unfolding.

J

126 (v) 55" 1'00" 1'05" 1'10"

Picc. db cl Bass cl Hrn Trpt. Hrp. Accord. Perc. V. I. VL II. Vla. Vc. cb. light. tape. effects.

127 76 1'20" 1'30"

Picc. db cl Bass cl Hrn Trpt. Hrp. Accord. Perc. V. I. VL II. Vla. Vc. cb. light. tape. effects.



Three pages of score excerpts from Hope Lee's **Voices in Time** for chamber ensemble, tape, and live electronics (1994). The shift to real time from metered time demonstrates the counterpoint between different streams of temporal passage, shaped further through conditions set within the fixed media component. The tapestry of instrumental parts weave through this rigid, albeit invisible, path of technological time, akin to streams and rivers of water seamlessly flowing along fixated trajectories in space.

But even more interesting for me is the fact that the pasts contained within these cultural roots materialize and weave themselves into a different time and geographical space, specifically that of Canada. The water soundscapes of Alberta become sites for creating affinity with a Chinese philosophy of time. A Canadian writer's landscape of words becomes a site for reproducing an "experience" of uprooting (or the refusal thereof). An electroacoustic studio in a Canadian university becomes a site for constructing simulacra of ancient modes of thinking. Despite claims of today's global society getting increasingly smaller through technology and connectivity, the intertextuality involved in Lee's *Voices in Time*, not only found within sources of material but also in its projection of interacting spaces, accurately reflects how large the world we occupy really is. In fact, I would even argue further that the world becomes larger and more spacious as we expand the limits of imaginaries in today's diverse and even polarized experiences.

Articulations of political space

Canada is an ever-growing site for significant intertextuality within everyday living as much as its immigration policies allow. Its landed immigrants know this fully well: Hungarian-born Canadian composer [István Anhalt](#) even observed that, “there is no connection between [various artifacts in Canadian museums], or rather, the connections are missing except in your imagination...the roughness of Canadian music comes from that, and when you feel that roughness you sense that the reflection is authentic” (1993). Elaine Keillor elucidates that Anhalt understood the Canadian imaginary and identity to include the ephemeral experience of physical Canadian spaces through time, based on the works of [John Beckwith](#) and other Canadian composers.⁴ If Jody Berland posits that “music has even more power as an articulation of space” (1994), I would extend it further towards music gaining

its maximum potential as “articulations of politics” within spaces where even the notion of Canada as an uneven yet stable landscape for exploring political affinities and home merges with artistic expression. The conflation of continuity and change, of isolation and belonging, and of imaginaries from different geographical places within Hope’s musical worlds is in itself an articulation both of her displacement and her grounding within lands imagined as spaces of belonging. While Lee expresses a sense of loss upon her mother’s death (“I feel like a lotus leaf floating in the pond without roots”), at the same time, she considers Canada as a microcosm of the globe. According to her, “being Canadian is being a world citizen.” In spite of loss, there is a renewed sense of home. There is...Hope.

True, but one question in my mind remains: does that apply when one falls short of being called “Canadian?” Depending on geopolitical networks, state immigration bureaucracy works through setting a hierarchy of legal status among residents. In Canada, Permanent Residents are one step closer towards acquiring citizenship, while temporary workers and residents are one or more steps removed from acquiring Permanent Resident status. Mobility among both physical and economic landscapes becomes a matter of status and privilege, rendering society as uneven and imbalanced. The convenience in acquiring such mobility depends on various factors like one’s class, family background, and place of origin, while the results of the process remain arbitrary and unpredictable. The people in power, who deem each prospective immigrant “qualified” for the title, remain as gatekeepers of other people’s futures and victories in life. For those who haven’t arrived yet, one just learns to journey on whatever means they can. After all, Filipino-American writer Bienvenido Santos writes that, “All exiles want to go home. Although many of them never return, in their imagination they make their journey a thousand times” (1982).⁵ Despite risks and the consequences of loss, displacement ironically encourages us to think how much we are capable of transposing ways of living and our sense of home.

Just like Hope Lee’s construction of her memorials, the idea of home becomes a vast landscape of memories, while we create our own means of traversing through them. Whether as immigrants or residents born in the land, we remain transient wanderers amidst those who lived and settled in this land before us, hoping for those “little miracles” in our journey through life just like Hope Lee’s mother would look forward to.

Endnotes

¹ Yen Le Espiritu, *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003): pp. 2-3.

² André Aciman, “Shadow Cities,” in *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. André Aciman (New York: New Press, 1999): pp. 15-34.

³ While Hope Lee shared her personal knowledge on the colonial legacy as littered with cruel and abusive physical punishment, Steven Denney tied these narratives with a consolidated view on Taiwan’s collective memory of Japan in a [2015 article](#). Outsiders may assume that present-day Taiwan generally views its former colonizer more favourably than the subsequent Nationalist Kuomintang government, but it is worth noting that the geopolitics surrounding Taiwan’s claims of legitimate sovereignty also shape the way they currently produce their histories, forms of education, and collective consciousness. Hence, the multi-layered, politically-charged consensus of a “benevolent imperial Japan” shows more of a rejection from succumbing to the mainland’s One-China Policy than giving actual merit to Japan’s colonial rule.

⁴ Elaine Keillor, *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006): p. 296.

⁵ Yen Espiritu, *Home Bound*, p. 11.

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