Canadian Diasporic Artists and Changing Narratives of Homeland: Jin-me Yoon and Kinga Araya

Home is not a fixed place but a constantly negotiated space between self and location (Jamelie Hassan)

Narratives of homeland and nationhood are inextricably connected with the theme of ethnic, racial or national identity. Conventional ideas of homeland depend on clearly defined, static notions of being firmly rooted in a specific geographic landscape or territory inhabited by ethnically or racially related individuals with stable and authentic identities. The experience of migration and various territorial displacements, however, has led to questioning of such simplistic narratives and to adopting Benedict Anderson’s concept of a nation-state as an “imagined community” (12-13) which relies more on consciously constructed cultural bonds rather than geographic, racial or ethnic ones.

Poststructural criticism argues that the concept of home and homeland is a discourse, not a specific location, a site of memory, history, myth, the past, the maternal or the psyche (Grice, McLeod). The literal meanings of home are substituted by the metaphorical ones, and the concept becomes relative, defined by the individual and his/her circumstances. The search for self has also been recognized as the desire for home, or to use Helena Grice words, “[f]ictions of self-discovery are fictions of homecoming” (223). The idea of homeland is particularly complex for diasporic artists and writers for whom the above theoretical considerations offer viable options. The question is: how does one locate home in a diaspora?

The primary interest of this essay is the exploration of the concept of homeland on the basis of selected works by two multidisciplinary Canadian diasporic artists of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds: Jin-me Yoon is of Korean and Kinga Araya of Polish descent. Yoon was born in 1960 in Seoul, Korea, and immigrated with her family to Vancouver in 1968 when she was only eight. Araya, born in Tarnów, Poland, in 1966, belongs to a more recent wave of immigrants as she landed in Canada only in 1990 when
she was twenty four. Both artists have been educated in Canadian arts schools and have exhibited their arts projects in Canada and abroad. Both have also been professors in Canadian universities. They travel extensively and engage in contemporary discussions on art.

I use the term diaspora according to contemporary diaspora studies which go beyond traditional notions of diaspora based on Jewish exile and their desire for homeland, and employ it to analyze various migrations and exilic or refugee conditions, including the new migrations caused by global changes (Matthews, 37). I agree with Julie Matthews that “‘diaspora’ has come to epitomize our contemporary transnational, intercultural experience” and as such it is related to such terms like: “identity, subjectivity, other, stranger, hybridity, diaspora, ‘diasporisation’, transnational belonging, travelling, nomadism, displacement, imagined community, contact zones and border crossing” (Matthews, 41). Traditional models of diaspora, as Matthews argues, tend to “centre and universalize symbolic connections to homeland” but “they fail to account for the relationship of ‘exilic’ consciousness, to broader historic, economic, political, national, racial and gendered relations” (Matthews, 36). These issues, however, are particularly relevant to the analysis of the arts projects by Yoon and Araya, the Canadian diasporic artists who opt for nontraditional approaches to the concept of homeland.

First, the artists investigate the concept of home through the perspective of their own experience, place and practice. Their work with the issues of homeland is directly connected with the question of migration, nation, gender, place and displacement. They fruitfully confront the dilemmas of their complex belonging or non-belonging, the problem of a diasporic self in the Canadian cultural landscape. They are not only involved in special artistic projects but they also write and talk in public about their transnational experience and problems of diaspora in general. Jin-me Yoon, for instance, questions the often repeated statement that in modernity “we’re all fragmented” and “everyone is displaced.” She points out that such statements can “serve to obliterate historical circumstances and mask material conditions to create a generalized, abstracted, metaphorical sense of exile and displacement” (Gagnon, 47). Jin-me Yoon’s work redefines the generalized concept of exile through a specific confrontation of her own and her family’s experience of migration to Canada, but she does not forget about other Asian nations in her analysis. Kinga Araya, on the other hand, does not focus extensively on the specificity of Polish migration to Canada. She concentrates more on theoretical discourses about otherness, estrangement,
hybridity, nomadic self, cultural displacement, and transience, using insights coming from a variety of critics and philosophers.

In Yoon’s and Araya’s reflections on transnationalism there is a strong focus on gender; what the artists offer is the contemporary feminist perspective on transnationalism, migration, and hybridity or diasporic self – and by extension – on the concept of homeland in a diaspora. For both of them, the body, functions as an important element of their work. One must inhabit oneself first before starting more general reflections on the idea of home and homelessness in a diaspora. The diasporic body is the first home to be reflected upon. Both Yoon and Araya use their own bodies for the examination of the construction of the subject and its relationship to place / home. As in a genre of textual autobiography they use their own biographies to generate theoretical insights; they also consciously bring feminist theory to reflect on their personal experiences. Being theoretically aware, they inscribe their knowledge of contemporary critical and philosophical discourses into their work. I will examine several projects by the artists to show their complex understanding of the idea of home in a diaspora.

**Jin-me Yoon**’s **explorations of the narrative of homeland**

Jin-me Yoon works in photography and mixed media installation on issues of representation of the Asian diasporic identity in the Canadian narrative of nationhood / homeland. Works such as *Souvenirs of the Self* (Yoon 1991b; 1991c), *A Group of Sixty-Seven* (1996), *Touring Home from Away* (1998), *Between Departure and Arrival* (1997), and *Welcome Stranger Welcome Home* (2002) show her compelling insight into the issue of homeland for a diasporic self in Canada, with a specific concentration on the problem of Canadianness as traditionally connected with a geographic determinacy and Anglo-French heritage. Her focus is on the idea that landscape can provide not only a sense of homeland but also dispossession and displacement. All of the projects explore the notion of subjectivity as it is impacted by race and gender and they seriously question the idea of landscape as a place of belonging and a major narrative of Canadian identity. Yoon chooses to work with documents that are important for transnational travellers: the postcard, the souvenir or the family album. In the 1991 photo based installation *Souvenirs of the Self*, Yoon makes a conceptual link with the history of Canadian landscape painting and its role in the construction of Canadian identity. To challenge the conflation of identity, gender and land she focuses on the Asian female subject who has traditionally been considered marginal in the western context; the difference is conspicuously
inscribed in the series of images documenting her sight-seeing tour. The project fuses tourism with the idea of home and homeland, and nationhood and belonging.

The installation consists of three huge colour photographs shot in the Canadian Rockies, which show Yoon at Lake Louise with a bus tour group and inside Banff’s Natural History Museum. The photographs are “confronted” with a painting *Athabasca Valley, Jasper Park* (1924) by Lawren Stewart Harris, a member of the famed nationalist group of artists, the Group of Seven. In the Museum photograph Yoon adopts a stiff, artificial pose in front of a beaver display, a symbol of Canadianness, above which there is a sign “Cabinets of Curiosities / objets bizarres.” The text on the back of her postcard series *Souvenirs of the Self*, prepared by Yoon as an extension of the project, originally in Korean, Chinese, Japanese, English and French states: “Marvel over the impressive collection of Western Canada’s oldest natural history museum. She looks with curiosity and imagines life beyond rigid casings” (Scott, 5). The Asian woman, albeit dressed in a European tourist fashion (a classic Scandinavian sweater, blue jeans and brown shoes), in the Canadian Anglo-French framework indeed features like an oddity as Canadianness is associated with whiteness, native birth and Anglo-French background.

Similarly in the Lake Louise Photograph, Yoon adopts another stiff and artificial pose. The attached text intones: “Feast your eyes on the picturesque beauty of this lake named to honour Princess Louise Caroline Alberta, daughter of Queen Victoria. She discovers the lake on a sunny day; before that she did not exist” (Scott, 5). It is the European elegance that is romanticized in this image at the expense of other cultural spaces of the Canadian multicultural society. Yoon asks: “Imaged in the heroic setting of the Canadian Rockies, can I as a non-Western enjoy a ‘naturalized’ relationship to this landscape?” (Yoon 1991a, 5). The painting by Lawren Harris, the quintessential image of Canadianness as epitomized by a lonely tree in the uninhabited landscape, corroborates the thesis that Canadianness is equated with a Canadian geographic space and with the erasure of native populations and the non-European immigrants. A similar perspective is inscribed in the 1996 project entitled *Group of Sixty Seven* which powerfully undermines the Anglo-Canadian version of national identity as associated with the aesthetics of the Group of Seven Painters. Yoon fills the uninhabited spaces of Lawren Harris’s Maligne Lake, Jasper Park and Emily Carr’s Old Time Cost Village, with photographic images of Korean men and women.
In *Souvenirs of the Self* the Asian woman features as the most incongruent element in the Canadian landscape which only shows that the current narrative of multiculturalism defies its ideals, that in fact it functions like a system of containment (Gagnon, 60). Yoon deliberately fills the window of the gallery and the space of the wall with fragments of sentences in Korean, Chinese, Japanese, English and French to challenge the dominant Anglo-French narrative of Canadian nationhood. The Korean text translates as, “We are also keepers of this land” (Scott, 7). The statement cogently foregrounds the problem of locating home in a diaspora.

In her interrogation of the diasporic self, Yoon pays also a special attention to the traditions and history she has inherited in Canada as an Asian woman. The term Asian hides differences between various ethnic and national groups in Asia and homogenizes them. She is Korean but is often referred to as Japanese or Chinese. Few Canadians, however, know about the complex history of Asian nations, the various power struggles between them, as for instance the racist treatment of the Koreans by the Japanese. Yoon has to deal not only with narratives of history inherited from Korea but also those constructed for Asian people in Canada. She finds it important to delve into the complexities of these narratives which shape diasporic identities. Yoon is a Korean Canadian woman in search for home in various narratives of Canadianness and in, what Roy Miki calls, “Asiancy”.

In the video installation *Between Departure and Arrival*, Yoon continues to examine the idea of inherited representations and histories and their impact on diasporic subjects. One element of the installation is a video montage of archival and documentary images of the early history of Chinese and Japanese Canadians in BC, including Japanese-Canadian internment camps, Chinese miners and railway workers, a Chinese head tax document, and recent video images of taxi rides through Vancouver and Seoul (Gagnon, 64–65). The images move and change quickly, the past and present are collapsed; images of clouds visible through an airplane window are also projected on the scenes. Yoon, commenting on the project states, “the work suggests the shifting, unfixed nature of identity. But at the same time, it pays attention to how the fragments and the multiplicities of identity can be historically grounded in the particular” (Gagnon, 68). The diasporic self is in the position of in-betweenness, torn between essentialist ideas of homeland and history and the alternative nomadic status of an itinerant self. Here, as in the case of other Yoon’s projects, “[w]hat may appear to be personal narratives in fact implicate larger social and historical considerations” (Gagnon, 46).
In another project, a video installation *Welcome Stranger Welcome Home*, the idea of homeland and foreignness is further developed. Here Yoon juxtaposes images of herself as an artist waving to a viewer in a typical tourist fashion, images of the Calgary Stampede, an annual event that has become a signifier of the town, and eight paintings of western Canadian landscapes, from the Glenbow Museum Collections, by Canadian railway artists. The image of the artist is superimposed on the video of the selected Canadian landscapes which were used to advertise the railroad and encourage immigration to western Canada. The images of landscapes behind the image of the artist are constantly changing and moving, making it impossible to determine whether they indeed represent specific Canadian locations. This strategy allows Yoon to argue that fixed locations and traditional geographic specificity are outmoded concepts.

Yoon’s project shows that the Calgary Parade imagery is specially constructed for the consumption of tourists. It is a commodified version of Western Canada with a particular focus on the imagery that reveals the globalization of the local (a UFO float with aliens in cowboy hats, Calgary Arabian horses with riders in exotic Arabic garments, various cultural communities floats, all under the rubric of the “wild west”, floats promoting tourism, and floats of multinational corporations) (Evenden). This is a conscious construction of the “uniqueness” of the Western Canada, which stresses the all-inclusive nature of its imagined multicultural community celebrating its own exceptionality- a vision of a perfect place for conducting international business. The figure of the waving minority culture artist, reveals, however, the constructed nature of this imagery which masks the historical problems of racism, classism and the patriarchal nature of the dominant society. The title of the installation suggests that the Canadian artist is welcome but only as a stranger, as a tourists. Yoon, being of a Korean background, is experiencing displacement in the culture which privileges certain identities and questions others. She is in the position of in-betweenness suggested by the role of an intermediary or a commentator, as shown in the project. The artist points out that some groups of population, in spite of a long history of immigration to this country, cannot call Canada home.

**Kinga Araya’s examination of the problem of homeland**

Kinga Araya, a conceptual and interdisciplinary artist specializing in videos, sculptures, performances and mixed-media installations, is also preoccupied with visual and theoretical representations of a contemporary diasporic identity, notions of homeland, displacement, exile and nomadic self, all of
which are fuelled by her experience of immigration from a communist country. In contrast to Yoon, her work reveals a more intense theoretical and philosophical consideration of her nomadic existence, indeterminate location and identity. She states openly:

While constantly moving in and out of different politico-cultural and geographical frames, I examine and meditate upon my itinerant „self”, my becoming identity […] The phenomenon of living in-between diverse cultures, countries and languages became a condition sine qua non of my artistic practice. I often question my belonging to one group or the other I encounter during my journeys. How much of my „self” is still „Polish”, how much of it was “Italianised” and how much has already become „Canadian”? I believe that the driving force behind my art works lies in an impossible desire to be in a total control of who I am and who I would like to become (Araya 2000b).

Yoon, who spent her formative years in Canada, immigrated to this country with her parents, who naturally decided about her immigration status. Korea for her is a site of memory and history, experienced through the narrative of her family and her education. She speaks from the position of a person who has inherited a specific condition of displacement and erasure that her family and Korean population in general have been experiencing in Canada in spite of the official multicultural narrative of Canadianness.

For Araya who, as a very young woman, took a serious personal decision about a political exile, the issue of personal displacement and estrangement became dominant features of her projects. Both artists problematize the formation of subjectivity as inscribed within the context of family, community and nation. Yoon, however, focuses more on the exploration of the family narrative and historical and sociological discourses grounded in specific archival and documentary sources, while Araya consciously and intensely works with poststructural and postcolonial theoretical discourses interrogating issues relating to the condition of a diasporic self, the problem of estrangement, language, nomadism and all issues connected with spiritual homelessness and pain of alienation.

Araya reflects on her state of foreignness in all of her places of residence, including Poland, where she felt to be in a state of domestic exile, which the political situation of the country forced on her. She had to learn “to read a double discourse and perform accordingly” (“domestic exile”) in all of the
political systems she chose to live in. Araya explains:

As I “walked through” various socio-political systems, I was continually anxious about not being able to perform successfully in adopted political and cultural structures. While the communist system represented to me a false prosthesis constructed over the original socialist idea, the Western capitalist world offered still another fiction about autonomous “self” (Araya 2004).

Araya successfully adopted in her art an ironic double-talk in both “deconstructive and constructive conceptual functions” (Araya 1998, 10). The deconstructive irony works well in De Gustibus non Disputandum Est/ There is no dispute about taste (Araya 1996), a performance which comments in the implementation of the multicultural policy in Canada. Araya, similar to Yoon, argues that Canadian narrative of identity does not fully embrace minority subjects. Araya walks in her “Canadian Multicultural Dress”, an outfit made of cotton into which she transferred photographs of both personal memories and rejections letters sent to her from prospective employers. The photographs are juxtaposed with copies of official Canadian documents such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Canadian Multicultural Act and Araya’s Landed Immigrant document. The artist explains: “Theoretically and politically speaking, I was welcomed to a new land of opportunities to build a better home; in reality, however, I found it impossible since continual rejections form employers did not make me feel ‘at home’” (Araya 1998, 11). One needs to add that in her 1997 project, Memorabilia (Things worthy of remembrance), she shows 40 pages of personal rejection letters sent to her over the period of six year.

The Western world has been chosen by Araya as a new homeland but it turned out to be a precarious and uncertain personal and artistic space. In Araya’s work there is a nostalgia for a certain grounding, comfort and stability but at the same time there is an awareness that such a choice prevents movement and development. Her performance entitled Grounded is a compelling metaphor for her diasporic condition and her understanding of homeland. The 1999 project was staged in Montreal as Grounded I and later in Poland, as Grounded II. It shows Araya coming to the stage with a kettle, mug and a prosthetic leg which she later straps to her body. This scene is juxtaposed with constantly moving video images of tourist travels projected on the back wall of the gallery and the sound of the artist’s breathing when she was climbing up a staircase. The prosthesis, possibly
connoting an emotional burden, not only prevents her from walking but also makes her “a stable tripod” (S. Anderson, 34); it provides a sense of groundedness while simultaneously constraining freedom and movement that a diasporic and nomadic self cherishes. The project reveals Araya’s interest in the ambivalent state of “being grounded and simultaneously, being ungrounded” (Araya 2000a, n.p.) One has to learn to live in the state of in-betweenness and create a sense of home within oneself, within one’s body.

Araya performs an intense work on the body in the context of various feminist discourses of the time. The narrative of exile, of a diasporic and nomadic subjectivity is inscribed in the estranged body of the artist herself. Her “performances are often characterized by ‘awkward’ physical movements and ‘unnatural’ bodily postures, inviting the spectator to view the body as a metaphor for alienation” (Kinga). The idea inscribed in such projects is that one has to inhabit oneself first and find a home in one’s body; nevertheless, Araya believes that the body is a social construct and hence it is complicit in upholding societal hierarchies and unjust social relations. The body determines our experience and performance of our physical reality (Kinga) and hence Araya focuses on physical explorations which aim at deconstructing the complicity. She is uncomfortable in her own body which she sees as constructed by current discourses of society, family or history, or to use other term, as “grounded” in the sense of being deprived of freedom. Finding a sense of home within herself is the only solution.

The lack of comfort Araya’s body experiences, once it has lost its touch with the narrative of traditional homeland, has become the foundation of her reflections on the concept of prosthetic self. The body is lacking its rootedness and hence needs a prostesis which, however, turns out to be useless, unnecessary and hampering movement, as it is cogently staged in *Walking with Arms* – a 4 minute video of a walking performance, during the four seasons in Montreal public park, with paradoxically small prostheses made out of maple wood and leather – signifiers of Canadianness. In her exploration of the ideas of prosthetic self, of otherness, estrangement and abjection, Araya draws on theoretical discourses of Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Jacques Derrida. This dialogue of Araya with various theoretical and arts discourses on “exile” allows her to transcend the domestic context of her personal explorations, her domestic exiles (Araya 2004). It is meaningful that the artist feels more interpellated to international discourses on the condition on exile than to Polish or Canadian national
myths and narratives. She chooses to live in the diaspora, as an itinerant self locating her home in an ambivalent space between metaphorical and psychological homelessness and the idea of homeland as a geographically determined site.

**Coda**

The work of both artists shows that the contemporary world requires a serious rethinking of the traditional meanings of homeland, international migration, ethnic and national identities. It also points out the need for contextualizing actual conditions of wandering and homelessness which are limited by many factors, including history, ethnicity, race and gender, as Yoon’s work reveals brilliantly. Cross-national migration does not necessarily mean a permanent change of home, as in the case of Araya, but it entails an expansion cultural space and cross-cultural or hybrid identity. To make one’s home in diaspora is to live a space whose boundaries are under perpetual negotiation. Such a home is a transitory enterprise for Araya, a settler/ dweller who always carries the desire to be a nomad and loves the idea of being grounded and ungrounded at the same time. In Yoon’s work there is no dominant desire for an itinerant lifestyle but the artist aims at rereading and rewriting of the Canadian narratives of homeland and nationhood which traditionally have excluded the minoritized subjects. The projects of both artists are excellent examples of diasporic art which redefines traditional concepts of homeland and homelessness.

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