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Mapping America, Re-mapping the World: The Cosmopolitanism of Agha Shahid Ali's A Nostalgist's Map of America

Published in 1991, Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali's collection A Nostalgist's Map of America is a book about the poet's travel in America.[1] From "the dead center of Pennsylvania" to Indian reservations in New Mexico, the collection weaves multiple landscapes, texts, and emotions into a map of America, on which the poet's traveling routes lead to thinking about language, identity, colonial and neocolonial politics. While critics like Lawrence Needham, Jeannie Chiu, and Rajini Srikanth, in reading the collection, have all focused on his themes of nostalgia, melancholy, and loss as an exile, this paper argues that Ali's "map of America" actually demonstrates a cosmopolitanism, a poetics that foregrounds a sentiment of compassion across cultural boundaries and implies a critique of power. To show that, I read Ali's poems in the context of postwar American travel poetry in order to study how his cosmopolitanism extends into new territories questions raised by such poets as Elizabeth Bishop, and how it invites a remapping of the world by calling attention to people, locations and cultures marginalized in dominating discourses. Also, I will draw on Homi Bhabha's theorizing of an "unhomely" condition in Location of Culture and examine how Ali highlights an "unhomely" travel that troubles textual, geographical and cultural boundaries and invites us to rethink the meaning of "home" and the "foreign."

[1] Ali (1949-2001); Kashmir, the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent.

Travel had always played a significant role in Ali's life and work. Growing up in Kashmir, he had studied in Kashmir and New Delhi before coming to America as a graduate student (Islam 263). He then settled down here as a poet and professor and had taught in several universities across the country. Although he claimed to be "a multiple-exile,"[2] his own travel within and between America and South Asia is largely voluntary.[3] He once writes, "To be in a diaspora, writing the exile's or the expatriate's poetry, is a privileged historical site" (53). He is aware of Edward Said's differentiation of exile as a forced condition from expatriates (53), but he would rather call himself an exile "for its resonance" (53). Assuming an identity for the "resonance" of the term, Ali shows a conscious choice of living and writing in a poetic way. By "resonance," he thinks about the aesthetics of travel, the illusion of belonging, the poetic significance of loss, and much more. If exile writing is usually preoccupied with "rootlessness, leavetaking, and dispossession" as Oscar Campomane has said about Filipino-American literature, what does Ali present in his "map of America" as a transnational traveler, or "exile" in his own sense? What does he feel "nostalgic" about? What new meaning does he give to the landscape and the travel routes he writes about?

Rajini Srikanth in her study of Ali and other South Asian American writers reminds us that American authors like Herman Melville, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein have established a long tradition of writing about traveling beyond their homeland (67-69). To read Ali's poetry against the transnational writing of American authors may be helpful indeed, yet Srikanth's over-general contextualization seems to leave out too much about how America's

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[2] In "A Tribute to Agha Shahid Ali: 'After You'," Christopher Merrill recalls that Ali claimed he was exiled from Kashmir, from India, and from his mother tongue, Urdu. It is also said elsewhere that he is triple exiled from Kashmir, from India, and from the United States.

[3] Jeannie Chiu mentions Ali's questionable "exile" status in a note to her essay, and Maimuna Dali Islam gives more attention to the issue by explaining how with a student visa and then a work permit Ali was able to travel freely between the United States and India.

relationship with the rest of the world has been changing dramatically from the time of Melville to the present global era. She does not explore how today's South Asian American writers may approach the relationship of America to the world from a fundamentally different viewpoint than the American authors a century ago. For a more precise exploration of influence and context, I think it is more illuminating to see Ali's transnational perspective in light of the trope of travel and the transnational concern in postwar American poetry, considering his study of English literature and poetry writing in America since the 1970s.

Critics of twentieth-century American poetry have noted the importance of travel as both a thematic concern and a mode of writing and thinking, but the study in this regard has merely attended to the mainstream, of which Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Questions of Travel" is a classic example. In this poem, Bishop's speaker travels in Brazil and finds herself facing endless questions about the meaning of both home and travel: "Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? / where should we be today? / Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres?" (93-94) Robert von Hallberg in his influential book American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980 (1985) devotes a chapter to travel poetry, in which he reads poems like this in the context of the United States' emergence as a military and economic power after World War II. He argues that travel poems of this period tend to focus on exotic cultural sights and thus form "part of America's cultural claim to global hegemony" (72). Linking tourism and imperialism, he find poets like Bishop not sharply opposing the government but occasionally showing "a sense of imperial doom" (83) and a measured skepticism about America's expansionism. Although only on mainstream poets, von Hallberg's contextualized reading invites profound thinking on the relationship between poetry and politics.

Indeed, Bishop's questions about the notions of "home" and "travel" are raised from the perspective of a privileged first-world tourist, who follows a route from the center to the periphery and in whose gaze the foreigners behave as "strangers" playing on the stage. Bishop herself has actually set up a background of colonial history against which to read the questions: this poem "Questions of Travel" in her 1965 collection is put immediately after a poem called "Brazil, January 1, 1502," a poem that revisits the history of the Portuguese colonization of Brazil, specifically the imposition of religion and the appropriation of the territory there. She is conscious of the imperialist impulse of many Euro-American traveling experiences and her own complicity in it, but the speaker of her poem does not show a clear attempt to resist or subvert that impulse. And her list of questions thus seems to be only a beginning begging for more interrogation: how much does the colonial history shape a contemporary traveler's perception of the "foreign"? How would power relations determine our notions of travel, of the "home," and the "foreign"? If a privileged first-world tourist's voice represents merely part of the picture, is there an alternative kind of travel writing? If so, how would this alternative travel writing approach the home and the world?

An examination of travel writing by Asian American poets like Ali may provide answers to the questions and therefore enrich the work done on postwar American poetry. Following von Hallberg's example of socio-political contextualizing, one can find that Ali's travel poems are concerned with questions of displacement, nation, and power as well. If Bishop stops short at merely hinting at United States' imperial culture, Ali's poems demonstrate how the history and aftermath of colonialism always mediate the traveler's movement and perception.

In a highly imaginative and thoughtful way, the book A Nostalgist Map of America sets local concerns within a broader transnational network. The opening poem "Eurydice," spoken

from Eurydice's voice, rewrites the classical myth of Orpheus against the background of the Nazi horror. It sets the tone for the whole book with a deep concern about the victims of human disasters. "I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror," a widely anthologized poem also from this book, presents pictures of the military coup in Peru and destruction of forest in Brazil in writing a journey through Utah. It forces questioning and thinking about the United States's involvement in South American political and economic turmoil. The central section of the book even better show a cross-cultural concern and the rethinking of the relation between the local and the global. Written for a dying friend, Phil, this section takes Emily Dickinson's poem "A Route of Evanescence," a poem both Phil and the poet like, as its epigraph. Dickinson has been known for living and writing in isolation, but recent critics have found her far from isolated intellectually and rather actively engaged with her historical moment through reading, correspondence, and poetry writing.[4] Ali's numerous allusions to Dickinson in his poems align with this new way of reading. Here, ushering in the poem "A Nostalgist's Map of America," Ali's use of "A Route of Evanescence" forces us to see something very interesting in Dickinson's highly concise, imagistic, and enigmatic poem.

> A Route of Evanescence
> With a revolving Wheel –
> A Resonance of Emerald –
> A Rush of Cochineal –
> And every Blossom on the Bush
> Adjust its tumbled Head –
> The mail from Tunis, probably,
> An easy Morning's Ride –

In a possible reading, Dickinson depicts a flying hummingbird touching the tip of a bush blossom, its ephemeral movement evoking the image of a postal vehicle carrying "mail from Tunis" and passing by fleetingly. The point of the poet's observation is linked to the outside

[4] Examples of this criticism can be seen in Esdale and Perelman, in recent issues of The Emily Dickinson Journal.

world through association, and the distance from Tunis to Amherst collapses in the moment the images are revealed. The poem, after all, was written in a time of early development of communication systems (telegraphy, for example), which started to make the continents closer than ever. Ali's epigraph invites the reader to revisit Dickinson, to see her rather worldly perspective latent behind her isolated position. More importantly, it sets the tone for Ali's following series of poems with its interesting way of linking together places geographically apart and mapping the world with a seemingly small focus.

Following Dickinson's lines, "A Nostagist's Map of America" deals with the speaker's feeling upon knowing that Phil, a close friend, is dying of AIDS.[5] The poem's geographical and emotional mapping, not without homoerotic undertones, reveals a spiritual search for belonging under the burden of identity.[6] It opens with the recollection of a driving tour toward Phil's home in Philadelphia and then moves from the landscape of "the dead center of Pennsylvania" to sunny California, where the dying Phil calls the speaker. The "map of America" thus outlined by the journeys is first a personal, emotional one that elicits a nostalgia by looking back at the end of a life toward the prime time of youth. In this act of reminiscing, art was discussed just for art's sake and the journey home was nothing but carefree. Now upon the disclosure of the tragic news, the speaker finds himself at a loss for a genuinely comforting response, for all the words in his mind seem "false." Even Dickinson's poem before the threat of AIDS remains powerless and merely enables word play:

> This, the least false: "You said each month you need
> new blood. Please forgive me, Phil, but I thought
> of your pain as a formal feeling, one
> useful for the letting go, your transfusions

[5] For the reason for writing this poem and "In Search of Evanescence" see his interview with Ansari and S. Paul.
[6] Nelson and Dharwadker, both in survey articles, mention in passing the undertones of homosexuality in Ali's poetry, particularly in regard to A Nostalgist's Map of America. Criticism of Ali's poetry has remained silent regarding this issue.

> mere wings to me, the push of numerous
> hummingbirds, souvenirs of Evanescence
> seen disappearing down a route of veins
> in an electric rush of cochineal. (37)

In regular quatrains like these throughout, the poem shows an elegiac sensibility under control. Without sentimentalizing, it ends by replacing the signified of Dickinson's imagistic language with associations of the disease. The speaker leaves more questions than answers for his readers. If language and art have insurmountable limits in the face of death, where can one find refuge and where is the ultimate home for an artist? Putting the nation in the title, Ali calls to mind the social and political issues related to homosexuality and to AIDS as a domestic plight of contemporary America. The "map of America" thus involves social thinking as well. What does Phil's moving from home in Pennsylvania to the West Coast at the last stage of his life tell about the burden of his identity and of his "dis-ease?" What does the speaker's—and the poet's—caution about his own sexual orientation say about his sense of belonging as a traveler in America? For Asian American artists like Ali, does travel represent their inevitable escape from root, or does travel actually show their attempt to reconstruct the conception of belonging?

Ali's poem series "In Search of Evanescence" following this title poem continues the meditation on language, art, and travel. And his question about the personal pursuit increasingly opens to thinking on a larger scale. Positionality in the world becomes not just an individual concern but involves the reality and future of nations and cultures. Strung together again by an elegiac mood in response to Phil's dying, the poem series nevertheless is as much about the speaker's reflection on his own transnational journey as about memories of Phil. In Poem 2 of the series, for example, the poet weaves the personal with the historical and the political into a thought-provoking travelogue. After a flashback of the last summer spent together with Phil, the

poem turns to describing a present westward drive across America, when suddenly we see this almost surreal point: "… But even when I pass—in Ohio—the one exit / to Calcutta, I don't know I've begun / mapping America, the city limits / of Evanescence now everywhere" (39). The juxtaposition of "Ohio" and "Calcutta," interestingly, is both surprising and natural. "Calcutta," the name of a major city in India, Ali's home country, is actually also the name of a small town in Ohio. The Indian city Calcutta was the Capital of British India from 1772 to 1912. Its name is originally in Bengali and later shortened and Anglicized by the British into "Calcutta." Cultural geography scholars have noted that the colonizers' act of "naming places" is their way of "claiming space" (Whelan 65; Shohat and Stam 142). The Indian city's name "Calcutta" is loaded with the colonial history of South Asia. In 2001, the city changed its official English name to "Kolkata" to restore its Bengali pronunciation and largely, to eliminate the legacy of British colonialism.[7] It is ironic to see while the Indian city struggled to erase the name "Calcutta" because of the history it carries, the name has taken roots in America. It remains a question whether the small town in Ohio was familiar with the complicated history of the Indian city when it picked the name for itself in the early twentieth century.[8] Yet it's interesting to note that Ohio, and the United States in general, seems extremely fascinated with exotic names, always naming towns and cities after foreign places (Rajghatta; Hammond 183). How do we read this act of mapping the world onto its own land, taking foreign names for its own use? Is it a record of nostalgia for the "old world," something related to immigration history that this country's culture is closely linked with? Or in some cases, could it also be a mark for United States' space and power claiming?

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[7] For the transformation history of the Indian city's name, see Encyclopedia Britannica and wikipedia.com.
[8] Information from the Historical Society of Ohio and the Calcutta (OH) Chamber of Commerce.

In any case, the appearance of "Calcutta" in Ali's poem gives a stunning effect on the poem's speaker: the supposed difference of a "foreign" land and the speaker's "home" land collapses into a common designation. Homi Bhabha in the introduction to Location of Culture defines an "unhomely" condition, or "the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (13). According to Bhabha, the unhomely moment happens in the dislocation and relocation of the home and the world and refers to the condition where the distinction between the private and the public, between the personal and the political, get blurred (13-14). Ali's speaker, at this point of the poem, finds himself in a similar situation that "confuses" the home and the world. As if a mirror image of his home country, this Midwest American "Calcutta" makes the world he travels in at once strange and peculiarly familiar. The two places geographically far apart suddenly merge into one, when the place name written on the road sign pops into horizon, as if asking, jokingly, whether one can really leave the home and its history totally behind while traveling the world.

The same moment receives even more elaboration in Ali's Poem 3 of the series: "When on Route 80 in Ohio / I came across an exit / to Calcutta // the temptation to write a poem / led me past the exit / so I could say // India always exists / off the turnpikes / of America" (41). The link of the two Calcuttas reminds the reader of India's relationship with America in the current context of global capitalism. "Off the turnpikes of America" gives a perfect metaphor for the invisible role countries like India play for the consumer market of America by way of sweatshops, labor outsourcing, and so on. Thus, travel, or the particular travel route, forces the poet and his readers not only to remember and to reconnect in history but also to recontextualize in the postcolonial present the relationship between the first and the third world.

Coming back to Poem 2 in "In Search of Evanescence," one finds, a few lines away from the "Calcutta" moment, the speaker's travel lead to more observation and thinking about histories and cultures beyond his own.

> a woman climbed the steps to Acoma,
> vanished into the sky. In the ghost towns
> of Arizona, there were charcoal tribes
>
> with desert voices, among their faces
> always the last speaker of a language.
> And there was always thirst: a train taking me
>
> From Bisbee, that copper landscape with bones,
> into a twilight with no water. … (39-40)

After the earlier flashback to India, the original homeland, here we see the travel also leads to a lament for the endangered civilization on this land. Here, the speaker takes his reader from the Midwest to New Mexico and Arizona, where traces of Native American reservations come into horizon — or rather, the traces of their "vanishing." His westward driving, after all, seems to be an ironic re-presentation of the "trail of tears" in Native American history. The image of the woman climbing the steps of Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico, and the following melancholy phrasing — "vanished," "ghost," "desert voices," and "last speaker of a language" — create an atmosphere of despair and a picture of the indigenous culture painfully in danger of extinction. Acoma, thanks to the research and writings by people like Manuel Pino, in the past two decades has drawn quite some attention as one of the indigenous communities seriously affected by uranium development in the southwestern United States (Pino). The uranium mines have brought devastating environmental, health, social, and cultural impact to Acoma and provoked heated social and political debates. Considering the poem's earlier reminder of the home *India*, Ali's reference to the predicament of *American Indians* here is more than coincidental. Columbus' misnaming of Native Americans and mis-mapping of the world have resulted in a possibility of

identification here. The endangered *American Indian* culture is both "home" and "foreign" to the *Indian* poet in his cosmopolitan point of view. If India's colonial history gives a pain Ali can feel as a South Asian, the American Indian tribes' subjection to neocolonialism in contemporary United States also brings a twinge of sadness to his journey. In the same passage, the other historical reference to Bisbee, Arizona, immediately following the desert scene is worth noting too: the booming mining industry there in the early twentieth century was certainly a mark of the industrialization of modern America, and the exploitation of natural resources and industrial invasion into the landscape here also left many traces of destruction.[9] Referring to these places, Ali's poem extends its melancholic temperament from a personal focus to a cosmopolitan concern across cultural boundaries. Between his lines, there are always provocative questions: If "India always exists off the turnpikes of America" in today's global economy, where are the "ghost towns" and "charcoal tribes" positioned today in America and in the world, economically and politically?

As Ali's poems lament the evanescence and vulnerability of a close friend's life, they at the same time draw attention to the fate of declining cultures and dying languages. In the poet's very act of traveling and writing, one can see an attempt to remember, to resist forgetting, and to put the present into sharp perspective by revisiting history. Bishop's questions of travel revolve around a privileged tourist's choice between home and the world and therefore did not reach too far beyond her personal pursuit; Ali's travel poems go further than that. For although writing about his travel in America, A Nostalgist Map of America is more concerned with the history and happenings behind or beyond the immediate view. The map the book presents is a travel guide for visiting easily overlooked or forgotten locations and for tracing lost traditions. In a

[9] For detailed information, see http://www.bisbeemuseum.org/.

thoughtful way, it weaves the history with the present of America, a land inextricably connected to other nations and cultures. It's a picture only a "nostalgist" like Ali can draw.

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