

Writing Citizenship: Flexible Forms of Belonging in Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer*

By

Aline Lo
University-Wisconsin Madison

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Abstract

This article draws on the idea of a more flexible category of citizenship from Michel Laguerre and Bonnie Honig, arguing that Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer* presents readers with a displacement narrative that negates national belonging and the traditional myth of immigrant America, and, instead, upholds an idea of self-identification that is based not on the nation-state, but on family continuity and finding refuge in writing.

In *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore writes that every autobiography is “an assembly of theories of the self and self-representation; of personal identity and one’s relation to a family, a region, a nation; and of citizenship and a politics of representativeness (and exclusion)” (12). Life writing, although it may present a close examination of one person’s life, is also a reflection of the larger networks, such as family, region, nation, that shape an individual. Gilmore also points to the complicated task of negotiating one’s sense of belonging to even wider and more formal networks, referring to “citizenship and a politics of representativeness (and exclusion).” In this paper, I focus on the latter two of Gilmore’s points concerning one’s ties to familial and social entities and one’s understanding of national belonging and citizenship, reading this

struggle to balance multiples sites of identification into Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*. As an example of refugee assimilation, Yang's text encourages us to consider how forced displacement complicates one's relation to a family torn apart by war, to a region that is no longer available or is completely foreign, and to an adopted nation that never seems to fulfill its promise. Drawing on the idea of a more flexible category of citizenship from Michel Laguerre and Bonnie Honig, I argue that *The Latehomecomer* presents readers with a displacement narrative that negates national belonging and the traditional myth of immigrant America, and, instead, upholds an idea of self-identification that is based not on the nation-state, but on family continuity and finding refuge in writing.

Published in 2008 and the first and, to date, only Hmong memoir distributed nationally, Yang's text, which captures the multi-generational and multi-national journey from the hills of Laos to a home in Minnesota, has garnered much interest among both Hmong and non-Hmong audiences and, in many ways, can easily slip into the larger narrative of immigrant America. After all, Yang, born in a Thai refugee camp to Hmong parents who have narrowly escaped violent persecution from a Communist Lao government, comes to the U.S. and is able to receive not only a college degree from Carleton College, but also a Master of Fine Arts from Columbia University. She is a well-regarded writer with numerous speaking engagements and ongoing projects, and, within the time span of the memoir, her family is able to move out of low-income housing projects into their very own home. Indeed, the familiar image of America as the land of freedom and opportunity open to all has held up immigrants, such as Yang, and their successful assimilation into American society as the example of how modern nation-

states can successfully deal with displaced groups. Yang's ability to raise her socioeconomic status through education and dedication is representative of a standard of assimilation that relies on an immigrant's outward ability to adapt and incorporate herself into the host nation.¹ In this model, assimilation and naturalization are assumed to be the goals of any immigrant, placing the immigrant into a larger conversation about citizenship and how it can guarantee a place in America on a political and social level. However, while the American mythos might promote a picture of a poor immigrant who, through the vast opportunities provided by this nation, works hard to achieve her dreams of financial success, scholars such as Aihwa Ong, Mae Ngai, Lisa Lowe, and Ali Behdad have shown that this narrative has not always held true. This myth of immigrant America, as Behdad terms it, relies heavily on the disavowal, the active forgetting of "nativism," which defines "citizenship and national identity in ways that are both exclusionary and normalizing" (xiii). In essence, it erases the new immigrant's struggle to become part of the host nation and forgets the many ways in which the U.S. government and social agencies attempt to mold and judge new citizens.

In her text *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*, Aihwa Ong examines the multiple networks involved in, what she calls, "transform[ing] refugees back into citizens" (78). She writes, "Various state agencies and private associations converge in facilitating the transition of displaced peoples, with the goal of changing refugee-subjects, perceived as shiftless and suspect, into normalized citizens

¹ Many recent scholars have shown how, historically, assimilation has been largely defined by an appearance of social and economic incorporation and not necessarily an internalization of the host nation's culture. Successful assimilation is also complicated by the physical traces of foreignness, such as accents, dress, and racial attributes. See specifically Eiichiro Azuma's *Between Two Empires*, which discusses how the Japanese American's calculated efforts toward assimilation were ultimately denied by the U.S. government's decision to place citizens of Japanese descent in internment camps during WWII.

who can be reasonably integrated into the host society” (80). In the case of Yang’s family, the transformation begins even before they set foot in the U.S. as they go through Phanat Nikhom Transition Camp. Yang describes the camp as a place where “Hmong people were pushed together, pushed apart, pushed out” (92). There the family learned about American homes – “how to turn on a stove and how to flush a toilet” –, what foods to prepare, and what rules must be obeyed (109). And, of course, there are multiple medical exams to pass and shots to receive. Yang, disliking the pain from the needles and struggling to escape, is warned by her parents that “it was the way to America...a place where they would not let illness in the door or admit little girls who could not hold pain” (101). Much like this scene of forced medical care, all of Yang’s memories about the camp and the process of “becoming” American are conveyed with the feelings of anxiety and fear that come from coercion. Even though Yang is merely a child at the time and does not want to go to America, she quickly realizes that there are going to be limitations and expectations placed on her and her family, and that *they* must be the ones to adapt to what lies ahead.

Although many of the measures taken at Phanat Nikhom Transition Camp were most likely meant to alleviate some of the impending culture shock, they also reflect, as Ong pointed earlier, a desire to protect the political and social American infrastructure and, as I will further argue later, to maintain a certain idea of immigrant America. As Michel Laguerre notes in *Diasporic Citizenship: Haitian Americans in Transnational America*, such camps are part of the larger scheme of nation-states:

Through its incorporation regime, the receiving country can prevent ineligible immigrants and refugees from entering, screen those who are

allowed in, create a hierarchy of desirable immigrants, create dispersal sites for the detention or processing of refugees, exclude and deport undesired refugees, and protect its borders. This system of surveillance is regimented in such a way as to produce *flexible bodies*, ready to be disciplined for incorporation once they are admitted to the country (76).

Processing refugees not only serves as quality and border control for the nation-state, but also conditions new immigrants to the disciplining structures of the host nation, priming them for the transformation into American citizens, or, as Bonnie Honig characterizes it, “supercitizens.”

Although it is not mandatory to become a U.S. citizen, for the refugee, who no longer has access to her previous home and who has been forcibly displaced, citizenship takes on both the legal claim to a homeland as well as the social obligations often associated with national belonging. The particular case of being a refugee perpetuates a need to establish formal rights and socioeconomic access to the adopted homeland. Even beyond the nation-state’s goal to construct legal citizens, which Laguerre sees as an attempt to “hold the diverse body of the nation together,” there are social and economic expectations associated with becoming part of the American nation (11). As Ong, among many scholars, argues “...access to income and to voting, which are inseparable from attaining social standing, respect, and prestige – have been central to shaping the meaning and character of American citizenship” (74). Not only are new immigrants asked to fit this idealized notion of citizenship, but, as Honig argues in her book *Democracy and the Foreigner*, they are most celebrated when they surpass such expectations and become supercitizens. This immigrant is the “iconic good immigrant [who] manages to have it all

– work, family, community, and a consensual relation to a largely nonconsensual democracy” (78). Because of these multiple levels of success, the supercitizen immigrant is seen as “neither needy nor threatening” and is “the object of neither American hostility nor charity but of outright adoration” (Honig 77). This is the celebrated immigrant who goes beyond merely having legal eligibility but also incredible wealth and social status. Becoming citizens, especially non-threatening citizens, and outwardly assimilating, then, means surpassing the American dream, a dream which Yang’s family understands and diligently works for as they try to uphold their promise as new citizens.

Yang’s family, like many others who had waited years in the camps before deciding to come to America, were lucky in that they were met by more established friends and family when they arrived in Minnesota, people who had helped sponsor them over and would help them adjust to their new lives. However, this did not mean that the transition would be easy. Their first night in America, Yang remembers her relatives’ words as “full of warnings and directions and reflections” (127). These types of conversations would occur again and again as her family struggled to stay together and succeed in America, to pretend as if they belonged here. Seeking comfort in each other, the Yang clan would get together for large meals and celebrations and organize “yearly family picnics to discuss [their] problems and progress” (136). As the children grew older, Yang noticed that “the kids were invited to the family meetings on how to improve our lives in America” and she began to realize that “what made our parents sad was not so much the hardness of the life they had to lead in America or the hardness of the lives they had led to get to America, but the hardness of *our* lives in America. It was always about the children. And so the pressure built” (169, 170-1). Representing pressure from

within the family as well as from American society, the effort to become citizens, as is common in most stories of assimilation, is passed on from the older generation to the younger and is full of complex nuances that are often erased in the glossed narrative of immigrant America.

In her text Honig warns, “If left unchallenged, national imaginations (and the U.S. national imagination in particular) are creative enough and well funded enough to recuperate symbolic immigrant energies for national projects, while also often mistreating actual immigrants” (79). That is to say, if we too quickly understand the hard-earned successes of new immigrants as purely fashioned by a “helpful” nation-state, we can too easily overlook the ways in which many are excluded from American society. As Ong also argues:

...belonging in the United States has from the beginning been defined in part by unofficial social meanings and criteria [which] have historically shaped not only the selective reception of newcomers, but also the internal stratifications and unequal access to prestige and power among those already here. For minorities and disadvantaged populations, the lived meanings of citizenship are completely entangled with such systems of exclusion, selection, and judgment. (70)

While, superficially, the Yang family's story can be seen as part of the greater narrative of immigrant America, Yang's memoir shows a skeptical and dissatisfied journey towards American success. Their unfinished path is, as Ong points out, “completely entangled with such systems of exclusion, selection, and judgment” and, if we examine

the details of Yang's text, we can begin to see the breaks and false starts in the great American tale as well as the emergence of a new form of citizenship.

Significantly, Yang begins her narration of her family's American years with a stark description — “concrete,” “cold and strong” — of the John J. McDonough Housing Projects, weaving her low-income home into the larger tapestry of American history (131). She explains that the houses had been “built after World War II for returning soldiers and their families,” waiting for the Hmong, “soldiers from a different war, not returning to families but remnants of them” (131). Part of an older story of post-war relocation and transition and now “part of the biggest wave of Hmong refugees to enter the country,” the McDonough projects symbolize Yang and her family's struggle to start a life anew. Even outside of their internal attempts to fit in, it is clear that there are external timelines and unfair expectations. She explains that for her parents, “who had waited on life long before it was their time, the government stepped in and told them: the welfare clock was ticking” (133). She watches as they endure through “the long hours they spent trying to be American enough to get into the system so that they could feed us and our dreams” (157). And, even as the family grows and is able, after ten years, to secure a home, the hallmark of the American dream, Yang cannot help but see “the mold that grew wild on [the new home's] walls” (203). Expressing her frustration at trying to be a citizen, of being successful homeowners, Yang writes:

...no matter how much my mother, Dawb [her older sister], or I scrubbed, it never stopped, no matter how many layers of paint we applied. I couldn't understand why the Hmong people had to run for their children, how their children had to make lives, again and again, in different soils, to

know belonging. Why it was that our house, so cute on the outside, rotted on the inside. (203)

Like the family's futile and yet necessary attempts to make the inside of their home match its outward appearance, the inner and frustrating struggle of the Hmong to minimize failing conditions seemed to matter little to those who were only judging assimilation from a quick glance of the outside. However, even as this image marks the indifference of the outward structure to those who are hopelessly fighting within it, it also marks the importance of other forms of belonging that go beyond American citizenship.

With the passing of welfare reform in 1996, Hmong families, who had relied on government aid as refugees and had not thought of being or becoming American citizens, suddenly felt the monetary pressure to apply for permanent status. Even though many had lived in the U.S. for years, had given birth to American citizens, had pushed their children to succeed socially and economically, psychologically, many shared Yang's sentiment that they "were refugees in this country, not citizens. It was not [their] home, only an asylum" (201). Because the impetus to move to America had emerged from a necessity for refuge, Yang and her family simply saw American citizenship as an extension of being refugees, of never being able to return home. She writes:

We had no more lands to return to. After nearly fifteen years, my family knew this. The camps in Thailand had closed. Hmong people there were repatriated, sometimes without knowledge, back into Laos. Families went missing in the process. Lives were lost. Children were killed. Ours were only beginning to raise their eyes to a country of peace, where guns at least were hidden and death did not occur in the scalding of grass or rains

that drizzled death. We could not handle any more death. In wanting to live, we were willing to try becoming Hmong Americans. (202-3)

Realizing that they had made the decision to survive from the moment they had fled from their villages, that returning would likely involve death, obtaining citizenship is yet another way to keep on living. Still, the effort is difficult and is a family affair with Yang's aunt and uncle studying together and, though failing the first time, eventually passing and inspiring Yang's parents to try as well. Depending on each other and their extended family, though, is not a new concept for the Yang's or the Hmong, as they had done so for centuries, and, when dealing with becoming American citizens, it proved again to be a defining source of strength and autonomy.

Alongside her study of "the interconnected everyday issues involved in shaping poor immigrants' ideas about what being American might mean," Ong also contemplates "how newcomers may be also active participants within institutional constraints and possibilities" (xvii). Although outwardly Yang and her family cannot reject their mandatory transformations, there are ways in which *they* are able to form their new identities as well as construct different, yet adjacent, models of belonging to and participating in American society. In fact, the Yang family is most successful at obtaining autonomy when they act collectively and pull on the resources of their (extended) familial unit. Initially relying on American aid in the form of housing and welfare, the actual process of becoming citizens takes shape with little help from U.S. agencies. As Ong goes on to argue, "...while governing technologies are involved in the making of citizens by subjecting them to given rationalities, norms, and practices, individuals also play a part in their own subjectification or self-making" (Ong 16). Even

in the most stringent aspects of the transformation process, such as medical exams, it is possible for new immigrants to take advantage of their own collective identity. Such is the case with Dawb's final medical examination in Phanat Nikhom where she is told that her eyes must clear up before the family can leave America. Instead of risking the entire family's departure, their father makes Yang go to the second exam instead of Dawb, knowing that the nurses would most likely be unable to tell the difference between the two. Ironically using their "flexible bodies," the two Yang sisters are able to subvert the very system that is attempting to regulate their bodies. Once in America, the family is able to join other members of the Yang clan, providing a much wider network of support and aid as they all try to become hyphenated Hmongs.

As the children felt pressure from their parents to assimilate and succeed, the adults also felt pressure from the government who, though helpful in providing classes on how to be American, did not help with questions on how to be Hmong-American. Knowing that the process of assimilation, much like the process of transition, would have to be worked out internally within her family and herself, Yang, in her attempts to become more American, "felt caught in the larger context of being Hmong" (203). Within herself, she feels the pressure to hold on to the things that make her Hmong and to the people who had raised her and loved her, and grows sick from trying to choose which place will be home to her heart. In the end, Yang decides that "a divided heart can be a good thing. One side can help the other" (207). Again using her family to shape her identity, one side of Yang's heart stays rooted in her grandmother, a figure who pulls together the various threads of Yang's family and whose life and death serves as a model and a memory of the Hmong culture, and one side is extended through her younger

siblings who will, as she notes in her dedication, “read the things [Grandma] never wrote.” In the end, she emerges from “the moldy house, a young woman who want[s] to be a writer and tell the stories of a people trying at life,” a young woman who has the heart to narrate her own sense of belonging to America (210).

Concluding his book on diasporic citizenship, Laguerre writes, “The natural site for the expression of citizenship is no longer the exclusive domain of the city-state or nation-state...” (177). Honig also expresses this sentiment for a new form of citizenship and democracy that does not revolve around that nation-state, one “that seeks, instead, to multiply the sites of affect, coordination, and organization that move people into (and sometimes out of) politics on their own behalves and on behalf of others” (40). For Yang and her family, the site of citizenship, against the popular myth of immigrant America that often overlooks the structural and social restraints placed on new immigrants, is centered on familial continuity rather than simply socioeconomic advancement. Even more specific to Yang, her commitment to narrate the story of her family and the Hmong people, who she inadvertently represents, secures an idea of citizenship in the act of writing and storytelling. On the final page of her text, she writes:

This year we tell the Hmong story the way it is, Father. Hold on, our dreams are coming. We didn't come all the way from the clouds just to go back, without a trace. We, seekers of refuge, will find it: if not in the world, then in each other. If not in life, then surely in books. Our dreams are coming, Grandmother. I am holding on to you as you are holding on to my father and me. Mother, I didn't forget you. My hand is all caught up in yours. Together, we are typing on the keyboards of time. We will

pick up the same warm breeze, the winds of summer. Our dreams are coming true, my Hmong brothers and sisters. (274)

Addressing her immediate family, the wider Hmong community, and also “seekers of refuge,” Yang promises a dream of a home in “each other” and “if not in life, then surely in books.” Despite the push and pull of moving between borders and cultures, Yang encourages her audience that a group can write their way into belonging and that it is not only the individual immigrant body that can be flexible, but also the national body.

In reading Yang's text as a representation of a more plastic sense of national belonging, I have shown that there is reluctance and difficulty in buying into the teleological metanarrative of U.S. immigration and citizenship. This de-centering of citizenship not only reveals the instability of the concept, but also allows space for the refugee to adjust and re-imagine herself, to accept the hybridity made explicit through displacement and assimilation. However, it is difficult to see this if refugees are quickly shuffled into the larger myth of immigrant America and of the “successful” immigrant or the supercitizen. Instead, if we recognize the refugee as another type of membership in the nation-state, we can see how assimilation can occur without citizenship and move beyond its legal and limited definition. Texts such as Yang's memoir that focus on a community's ability to assimilate itself helps to re-imagine the nation-state as an institution that is more aware of the relationship between the individual and the community, that is more aware of its impositions and limitations, that is more accepting of the inevitable and multiple transformations involved in migration, particularly forced displacement.

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Author Info:

Aline Lo is currently a doctoral candidate in the field of literary studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she will be defending a dissertation entitled “Manifested Destinies: Refugee Narratives in Contemporary American Literature” in the Spring of 2012. While her recent project focuses on forced displacement, her larger interests include migration and ethnic studies, as well as gender and citizenship.

