

Embracing Indeterminacy: Intersections of the Asian American Avant-Garde, Eco-poetics, and
the Descriptive-Meditative Structure in Contemporary Poetry

Laurel Wilkinson

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Pimone Triplett

Andrew Feld

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Laurel Wilkinson

University of Washington

Abstract

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Laurel Wilkinson

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Pimone Triplett

Department of English

This thesis reads poems in Mia Ayumi Malhotra's *Isako Isako* and Mei-mei Burssenbrugge's *Hello, the Roses* to explore how contemporary modes of poetic documentation, description, and meditation can counteract erasure wrought by ongoing mechanisms and legacies of imperialism by embracing the 'indeterminate'— that which cannot be definitely or precisely determined. Drawing upon Timothy Yu's framework of the Asian American avant-garde and various contemporary frameworks of ecopoetry as methodologies of resistance, I explore the ways in which poetry can facilitate destabilization of existing centers of power; reclamation of bodily, mental, and environmental autonomy and integrity; figuration of a lyric speaker as multi-faceted, self-aware, and accountable for the limitations of individual perception; and investment in more holistic, curious, adaptive engagement with the world.

Introduction

A ship bow's shape writes an A
to mark the indefinite way. A name
is a persona, per son, per song.
Sonar searches the sea by singing. (Som 28)

In the poem “Coaching Papers,” Chicano and Chinese American poet Brandon Som meditates on the ways in which sound and sight shape and shift how we understand ourselves and our histories. By rendering his grandfather’s immigration to the United States via a transpacific journey, Som draws attention to the intersections of race, ethnicity, culture, language, geography, and environment—the unstable and ever-evolving lenses through which we perceive ourselves and the world around us. In naming “the indefinite way,” Som’s poem highlights through sonic resonance the many ways the ‘indeterminate,’ that which cannot be definitely or precisely determined, might be understood as both a critical and a lived term—a poetic device that resists binary, fixed, and isolate representations of individuals and communities whose experiences of the world are instead, multi-faceted, relational, and contingent.

As a white-presenting multiethnic woman who has spent her entire life living on unceded Indigenous lands, I am well acquainted with challenges of being asked to participate in and contribute to communities whose membership and values prove discordant with the nuances of my lived experience. Ever since I can remember, I’ve been able to recite my ethnicity as if it were as obvious as the color of my eyes: ½ English, ¼ Japanese, ¼ Italian. And yet, as Joan Didion articulates in *Where I was From*, something never quite “added up.” I could recite the epic that was my family origin story, but I struggled to fill out surveys that asked me to quantify my racial identity or find a club at school where I could congregate with students whose experiences of perception and being perceived were similar to my own.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, as a poet, I gravitate toward work that highlights the nuances and complexity of perception and seeks to reframe our relationship to ourselves and the world around us. I argue that poems embracing indeterminate relationships can potentially outmaneuver colonial hierarchies of categorization and classification by allowing the poet to envision a radical space in which the individual is figured as one component of a larger, interdependent community of both human and non-human members. Through close readings of poems in Mia Ayumi Malhotra's *Isako Isako* and Mei-mei Burssenbrugge's *Hello, the Roses*, I examine the ways in which contemporary modes of poetic documentation, description, and meditation can counteract the erasure wrought by the ongoing mechanisms and legacies of imperialism. Drawing upon the frameworks of the Asian American avant-garde and ecopoetry for methodologies of resistance, I seek to explore the ways in which poetry can facilitate destabilization of existing centers of power; reclamation of bodily, mental, and environmental autonomy and integrity; figuration of a lyric speaker as multi-faceted, self-aware, and accountable for the limitations of individual perception; and investment in more holistic, curious, adaptive engagement with the world.

Engaging with the Asian American Avant-Garde

My interest in ‘indeterminacy’ as a critical term is underscored by my experience of indeterminacy as a lived term: in many ways, my relationship to my late maternal grandmother—including my grief and struggle to maintain a sense of connection to my Japanese heritage as a white-presenting, monolingual American—is one of uncertainty, contradiction, and liminality. Yet, that relationship is also the locus of connection, imagination, and artistic generation. It has encouraged me to explore and engage critically with various traditions of Asian American poetics, including the Asian American avant-garde as practiced by women, in particular.

According to literary critic Timothy Yu, the Asian American avant-garde can be understood by the way it seeks to establish a community: “by aesthetic means” (“Toward a Sociology” 6). Drawing upon Peter Burger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which suggests that “the avant-garde’s goal is to ‘reintegrate art into the praxis of life’” (6), Yu argues that Asian American poets—whose cultural, economic, and social experiences as a collective are decisively varied—have established cohesive social spaces and organizations despite their inherent positional indeterminacy by orienting around artistic production (7). Identifying the origins of this tradition, he writes, “Asian American poetry of the 1970s represents a concerted attempt to perform precisely that task Burger finds characteristic of the avant-garde: to organize a distinctively Asian American life praxis from a basis in Asian American art” (7). Yu further qualifies that “Asian American culture is itself a composite that attempts to include vastly different historical experiences” (7), affirming that through the lens he has cultivated, the Asian American avant-garde is a space of radical inclusivity, and, thus, particularly well-aligned with my personal and artistic concerns.

Furthermore, in his introduction to *Nests and Strangers: On Asian American Women Poets*, Yu characterizes Asian American women's poetics, specifically, as "a relentlessly experimental practice, in the broadest sense of that word: not a particular set of formal techniques, but a willingness to regard all elements of a poem—political, contextual, biographical, formal—as truly open" (5). For Yu, Asian American women's poetics is a markedly radical practice—one that cannot be distilled into an essentialist reduction of stylistic or thematic concerns. Instead, Yu's statement is an affirmation of the complexity, multiplicity, and intersectionality of the feminine Asian American experience. By highlighting the ways that Asian American women poets "[engage] overlapping, cross-cutting identifications," he highlights the ways their poetics "challenge the fixity of identity" (6) and embrace what this essay has termed 'indeterminacy.'

While Yu's rejection of aesthetic categorization dovetails nicely with the concept of 'indeterminacy,' it does not necessarily preclude the value of identifying patterns of overlap in methodologies employed by contemporary Asian American women poets from a craft perspective. Consequently, in searching for a 'jumping-off point' for my analysis of Malhotra and Berssenbrugge, I turned to Michael Leong's essay "Traditions of Innovation in Asian American Poetry." Leong's essay offers a framework of Asian American poetics that centers three distinct modes of poetic praxis: a surrealist mode, a documental mode, and a phenomenological mode (32). Rightfully so, Leong qualifies that his delineation of three modes is by no means exhaustive or all-inclusive; nevertheless, for the purposes of this essay, I believe the latter two modes present relevant frameworks and vocabularies for contextualizing and analyzing the work of Malhotra and Berssenbrugge, respectively.

The phenomenological mode, as practiced by Berssenbrugge, harnesses the powers of description and meditation to explore “the intricate ways an embodied subject meaningfully interacts within time and space with other subjects and objects” (Leong 41). Berssenbrugge’s sustained interest in “conceptual and lexical complexities” (41) encouraged me to consider and draw connections between the lived and critical implications of “seeing” in the contexts of racial and environmental indeterminacy, and thereby comprise the subject matter of the latter half of this critical investigation.

The documental mode (which Leong derives etymologically from the adjectival denotation of the term “documentary” —“of the nature of or consisting in documents”), as practiced by Malhotra, might also be understood in relation to ‘seeing’ (37). According to Leong, “the cultural labor of the documental poet is to resocialize documents by bringing items from private archives into public view and/or rhetorically transforming publicly available information” (37). In other words, the documental mode makes visible narratives, bodies, and ideas suppressed and erased by the dominant culture and defamiliarizes, reorients, and reshapes the documents employed to mechanize and legitimize that dominant culture. My interest in Malhotra, then, is rooted both in my desire to destabilize the normative cultural forces that enforce determinate, and thereby limiting, models of identity and to re-document personal and public histories through verse.

Documenting Indeterminacy in Mia Ayumi Malhotra's *Isako Isako*

Mia Ayumi Malhotra's book *Isako Isako* follows in the tradition of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* by interweaving "myth, memory, and history" (Leong 37) to document the embodied lives of a female Japanese American lineage. United through the multivalent and multi-vocal character of "Isako," an intergenerational amalgam of Malhotra and her female relatives, *Isako Isako* locates a space of indeterminacy across various geographies, times, bodies, memories, and imaginations, making visible the plight of the Asian Diaspora, including the legacy of Japanese American Incarceration, the lasting violence of wars in the Pacific, and the inequities perpetuated by imperialism and tourism in Southeast Asia.

Malhotra's collection is divided into three distinct sections—"Legion My Lesion," "A History of Lost Things," and "In the Quiet After"—which act as signifiers of her larger thematic concerns with war, loss, and death. These sections are prefaced by two poems "To My Many Mothers, Issei and Nisei" and "A History of Isako," as well as a facsimile of the infamous "Instructions To All Persons of Japanese Ancestry," which was used to inform Japanese Americans of the terms of Civilian Exclusion Order No. 34 and enact forced removal and Incarceration during WWII in accordance with Executive Order 9066 (Malhotra 101). Malhotra's two poems sandwich the insidious document, foreshadowing not only the impact of Japanese American Incarceration on her cultural inheritance and poetic praxis, but also her chosen tools of literary resistance, including poetic apostrophe, anaphora, narrative fragmentation, grotesque imagery, reappropriation of extraliterary language, and strategic violations of standard English grammar and conventions. These tools of resistance enact both forms of documental poetics delineated by Leong: resurfacing personal narratives, bodies, and experiences erased or suppressed by the dominant culture *and* challenging the rhetoric of

extraliterary public, historical, or governmental documents. Consequently, in conjunction, “To My Many Mothers, Issei and Nisei,” and “A History of Isako,” seem to me an intriguing subject for a case study on the transformative nature of the documental mode—namely the resurfacing of female Japanese American narratives and embodied experiences and a reframing of the language of Japanese American Incarceration that challenges its social, historical, and political coherence and determinacy.

In “To My Many Mothers, Issei and Nisei,” Malhotra celebrates the resiliency of her Incarcerated female relatives by praising their many domestic, familial, and community labors in a song-like address—one akin to a contemporary ode or paean. Hailing “gravy biscuits/ and home-baked bread,” “goddesses of goulash and green beans,” “years lost/to sharecropping and strawberries,” “the packing shed left to cobweb,” and “camp midwives [and] Nisei girls/shooting hoops and swatting birdies,” an unnamed speaker employs poetic apostrophe to catalog the nuances of Japanese American women’s daily lives in and outside the incarceration camps (1-2). The organizing principle of the 32-line monostrophe is anaphora: though the free-verse lines are metrically irregular and enjambed, the speaker begins clauses with “Praise be,” “Praise to,” and “Hallelujah,” to pattern the verse sonically and syntactically. This patterning makes visible the embodied experiences of Japanese American women by tracing, tracking, or bearing witness to a collection of memories, images, and names—by summoning “private archives into public view” (Leong 37) through apostrophe. Some subjects of these “private archives” (37), such as “Sunday dinners,” and “church bento socials” (Malhotra 1), are contextually (i.e., spatially or temporally) ambiguous, providing readers with quotidian imagery that feels relatable. Other subjects are more harrowing—namely, direct referents to Japanese American Incarceration, which progress in specificity from generalized “crowded horse stalls,” to more contextualized

“half-build barracks of Rohwer, Arkansas,” to precise records of “Block 9–9-C, /100. *Sakai, Chu*. 102. *Sakai, Ruby*. 103. *Sakai, Kazue*” (1-2). All subjects, though, are united in solidarity through the poem’s contiguous form, nuanced descriptions, and triumphant closing assertion that, “Her truth marches on” (2). By using the singular pronoun “Her” without a clear antecedent, the poem’s speaker gestures toward the organizing principle of the entire collection: the unification of female Japanese American subjectivity into a single, indeterminate persona—Isako. “We are linked to one another’s bodies, throughout time and history in a female lineage that has carried on the human story, carried the men and the women, given life and suck to all the living, closed the eyes of all the dead,” explains psychologist and poet Naomi Ruth Lowinsky in the book’s epigraph.

The presence of an embodied, intergenerational, resilient, and indeterminate female experience in this poem stands in stark contrast to the following facsimile and its detached, unaffected tone, militaristic diction, and strict lists of procedures and allowances (e.g., “carry [...] bedding and linens,” “no pets,” “all items [...] securely packaged, tied and plainly marked with the name of the owner” (Malhotra 1-5)). The government-issued “Instructions” require “All persons of Japanese ancestry” (a designation that essentializes their identity on the basis of race/ethnicity and negates their Americanness) to engage in the task of their own erasure—to surrender their possessions aside from “a limited amount of clothing and equipment,” and to “be evacuated” from their homes, jobs, schools, and communities (3-4). Nowhere in the “Instructions” is there space allotted for “elbows/ in rose clippings,” “the nursery truck revving in the morning,” or “the foggy peaks of San Francisco” (1); only “toilet articles for each member of the family,” and “sufficient knives, forks, spoons, plates, bowls, and cups” (4). Though both the poem and the facsimile, in the context of the collection, seek to catalog or record

information, their juxtaposition reveals a jarring disparity: absent nuance, embodiment, and poetic attention to detail, the facsimile records only the rhetoric of dehumanization and dispossession. In effect, by prefacing the extraliterary document with a personal and jubilant tribute to Japanese American survival, Malhotra literally repositions the historical and narrative context of Japanese American Incarceration. In doing so, she engages in the second form of documental poetics as defined by Leong (37): “rhetorically transform[ing] publicly available information.”

The second of Malhotra’s introductory poems, “A History of Isako,” continues this rhetorical transformation: the poem bears traces of the trauma wrought by Japanese American Incarceration and seeks to recontextualize that trauma through various forms of poetic fragmentation. Indeed, the poem’s title, which employs an indeterminate, rather than determinate, article (*a* vs *the*), suggests that the poem seeks to document a multiplicity of histories. Structurally, the poem is subdivided into four numbered sections, each of which introduces a distinct poetic voice/speaker that reappears throughout the collection. Together, these speakers assemble the intergenerational persona of “Isako,” whose indeterminate character not only bears witness to a multiplicity of experiences, but also resists the categorization and objectification of the directly preceding facsimile. Formally, “A History of Isako” takes the shape of a prose poem, and therefore, on the page, appears more overtly ‘documental’ than Malhotra’s first poem. Yet this orderly lineation only briefly obfuscates Malhotra’s more radical response to, contestation with, and subversion of the “Instructions” through strategic violation of standard English grammar and conventions, grotesque imagery, lyric fragmentation, and reappropriation of extraliterary language.

The first section of “A History of Isako,” presents a speaker who uses what has been pejoratively termed ‘broken’ (read: ‘fractured’) English: the speaker omits articles (e.g., “Isako is lady”), violates subject-verb agreement (e.g. “lady wipe dust”), and occasionally employs singular nouns in place of plural nouns (e.g. “all question run to one”) (Malhotra 6). Malhotra’s strategic violation of English grammar and conventions “Mark [sic] difference” (6) of the speaker, self-consciously paying respect and lending visibility to Issei women’s experiences of language difference and translingualism. This language difference is highlighted through anaphora: most sentences begin with the phrase “Isako is lady,” which feels echoic of the opening “Praise be”’s and “Halleluja”’s (Malhotra 1, 6). Yet the poem’s tone is grave: disjointed and grotesque imagery of the war in Japan, scenes of Incarceration, and snippets of post-war domesticity and discrimination as figured through culturally salient referents of the narrator force the reader to contend with a resurfaced history of violence and trauma. The speaker “watch as shrapnel slice body like pickled ginger to be dyed pink and buried,” “wipe spittle from cheek in Cincinnati,” and “tuck blade beneath box spring” (6): as Isako witnesses and anticipates bodily harm and psychological fracturing, so too does the reader.

The second section of the poem employs a narrative voice that is witty, confident, and didactic—one that highlights the rhetorical fallacies of the dominant culture’s historicity by illuminating productive loci of indeterminacy. Take for example, the section’s first four sentences: “I do not remember where Isako is during the war. Is it Osaka or is it Ohio. I do not wish to appear foolish. There is the question of authenticity” (7). Employing a self-aware dramatic irony, the speaker immediately challenges her own reliability by highlighting the fallibility of memory. This fallibility is underscored by an implausible desire to appear ‘wise’ and ‘authentic’—terms imbued with the hypocrisy of the dominant culture’s erasure of Japanese

American experience. Yet, read as statements reflective of Isako's amalgamated identity, the logic of the poem shifts, and the statements read as accurate descriptors of the narrator's indeterminate relationship to Isako. The narrator, who literally cannot remember where "Isako is during the war," feels the oppression of "a page that is otherwise white" (7); she experiences the irony of resurfacing a history by using the very linguistic tools that enacted Japanese American suffering and erasure. The speaker states,

I wish to write about this important person in my life but cannot do so without saying
_____ or _____.

Instead I write about dust. A pigment that stains yellow and cannot be removed.
(Malhotra 7)

In directly naming her authorial concerns through the clause "I wish to write about this important person in my life," the speaker reclaims authorial 'authority' of Isako's history. Yet this 'authority' is in conflict with the unknowns—the blank spaces or 'fill in the blanks' that obscure what the speaker must say to write about "this important person." Consequently, these strategic omissions "mark" the fragmentary, or indeterminate, nature of erasure: they hold the dominant culture accountable for deliberate omission while also speaking to the way in which trauma erases access to both private and public narratives. In the absence of information about "this important person," the speaker instead writes about "dust" —a descriptor that, earlier and later in Malhotra's verse, is employed as a symbol of Incarceration: e.g. "dusty sheets" (2), "wipe dust from tin plate in mess hall" (6) "In camp, it's said, they cut/gardens into Arkansas desert, [...] through dust" (31). "Dust," according to the speaker, is racialized: "it stains yellow" —a pejorative term for Asian and Asian American skin tone—and, like the color of one's skin, it "cannot be removed." In sum, the second section stands as a quasi-ars poetica, establishing key

thematic tensions re: “authority,” narration, erasure, absence, and embodied racial identity that resurface throughout the collection.

The poem’s third section follows a more conventional narrative trajectory: in describing a speaker’s interaction with a traditional Japanese kimono, the poem reveals the fragmentary relationship of that speaker to “Isako,” a figure to whom that speaker is deferential. According to the speaker, “knowledge” regarding how to fold a kimono is customarily “passed from mother to daughter.” However, the speaker reveals in confessional style that she has worn a kimono “only once in [her] life,” implying that this tradition was lost to her (Malhotra 8). Directly following the sentence that ends with “mother to daughter,” a new sentence begins, “Isako scolds me for rumpling the collar”; this juxtaposition seems to suggest that the narrator instead learns from Isako—who stands in as a female relative to educate the speaker. Though further details of this relationship are left ambiguous, the speaker reveals that the garment “bears several discolorations on the bodice,” a potential allusion to the symbol of “dust” that “stains,” and thereby, a potential relic of Incarceration. After Isako takes action and “smooths [the kimono] along the traditional folds,” the poem undergoes a tonal shift: the speaker temporarily ceases to reference the narrative directly and instead, in a poetic gesture, likens the wrapping of a deceased person’s kimono (“right over left”) to the progression of English language on a page. In a statement that reads equally as narratively and aesthetically, the speaker asserts “I rewrap the garment believing a new grammar may be necessary.” The speaker’s recognition of this incompatibility or tension between English language and Japanese tradition inspires a linguistic response. In other words, through narrative juxtaposition and association, Malhotra suggests that reclamation of cultural inheritance and rhetorical innovation are linked.

In the fourth section, this suggestion is actualized: Malhotra rearranges and reappropriates the language of the facsimile to highlight its unstated objectives and rhetorical hypocrisies. Forgoing end stops, this section violates conventions of grammar and narrative, scrambling the language of the “Instructions” to highlight the way in which the language strategically fractures Japanese American lives and communities. Take, for instance, the line “instructions to all living persons Japanese in the following ancestry area” (Malhotra 9): Malhotra’s rearrangement of the original language, “Instructions to All persons of Japanese Ancestry Living in the following areas” (3), highlights several of the government’s ‘hidden agendas’ in enacting Executive Order 9066. Firstly, by adding the word “living” before the word “persons,” Malhotra emphasizes that despite the language’s determinacy and absolutism, the instructions are directed not at corpses, or all deceased persons of Japanese ancestry, but at “living,” breathing American immigrants and citizens. Similarly, the phrase “following ancestry area” highlights the hypocritical manner by which the language targets only Japanese Americans living in specific geographical areas—namely, established and highly populous Japanese American communities on the west coast. This literal rearrangement of the rhetoric of Incarceration highlights the way in which the documental mode enables Malhotra to reclaim agency of and rewrite a painful record of historical oppression.

Ultimately, as demonstrated through a close reading of “To My Many Mothers Issei and Nisei” and “A History of Isako,” Malhotra’s poems reclaim the integrity of bodies, minds, places, and possessions subjected to systematic violence, silencing, theft, and extraction. Her deft application of both forms of poetic documentation—resurfacing personal narratives, bodies, and experiences erased or suppressed by the dominant culture *and* challenging the rhetoric of extraliterary public, historical, or governmental documents—outmaneuvers the efforts of the US

government to impose a determinate, and thereby limiting, historicity upon narratives of Japanese American incarceration. Instead, in the tradition of the Asian American avant-garde, Malhotra's verse calls into reality an active, expansive, and indeterminate female Japanese American lineage whose "truth marches on" (Malhotra 2).

Seeing Phenomenologically: Berssenbrugge's Reinvention of the Descriptive-Meditative Structure through an Eco-poetic Lens

In his essay "The Descriptive-Meditative Structure," Corey Marks outlines the characteristics, applications, and variations of the eponymous pattern of poetic turning, first coined by M.H. Abrams in the essay "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric" (123). Marks identifies three distinct movements in a traditional descriptive-meditative poem: description of a specific physical environment by a lyric speaker, mediation on a memory or idea triggered by that environment, and re-description of the environment that reflects a perspectival change enacted by the speaker's interior rumination. While Marks follows Abrams in reading Romantic poets Wordsworth and Coleridge through the lens of the descriptive-meditative structure, he also traces the evolution and variations of the structure, including two condensed and one inverse (meditative-descriptive) iterations, in modern and contemporary poetry. Through close readings of Charles Wright, Louise Gluck, and Marianne Moore, Marks suggests that the speaker's perspectival change in a descriptive-meditative poem's third movement is not synonymous with Romantic sensibility or overwrought lyricism. In fact, according to Marks, a skeptical tone and the absence of definitive narrative resolution often enhance the work of the descriptive-meditative structure by highlighting the humanistic tendency to superimpose meaning externally. As Marks articulates, "[i]t is our nature to engage the world imaginatively even if we recognize our limitations. And by acknowledging those limitations, [descriptive-meditative] poetry can examine how we create our sense of the world and our place in it" (135).

Nevertheless, as Paul Otremba observes in his essay "The Landscape of Ekphrasis in the Contemporary Descriptive-Meditative Lyric," critics of the structure still object to what they identify as an oppressively lyric mode of address and tendency toward epiphanic landings—

namely, an erroneously stable “I.” These critics, many of whom cite Lyn Hejinian’s “The Rejection of Closure,” understand the descriptive-meditative structure, variant or otherwise, as inherently tied to an individuated, perceptual ‘lyric’ subjectivity (a concern distinct from those of minority poets/poets of color who have, in many ways, challenged the perpetuation of false binaries surrounding use of the lyric “I”). While most poets concur that a lyric asserting “super validated self as ‘authority’” (Gander and Kinsella viii) risks enacting the mechanisms of Eurocentric and imperialist hierarchies, Otremba suggests that to dismiss the descriptive-meditative lyric in total is to overlook its potential to render the arbitrary nature of linguistic and semantic constructs, a position with regard to the lyric that contradicts the very principles of Language-adjacent concerns regarding “the disjuncture between words and meaning” and form as “not a fixture but an activity” (Hejinian). According to Otremba, the lyric speaker’s so-called ‘epiphany’ need not be the static, earth-shattering revelation critics make it out to be; construed as iterative and recursive, the ‘epiphany’ necessitates the lyric speaker’s movement between description and mediation, which *can* be rendered as dynamic and self-consciously unstable or fallible. By lending visibility to the lyric speaker’s idiosyncratic movement between thought and observation, the structure highlights the impossibility of locating a fixed self or unchanging ideological stance. As Otremba affirms, “The work of the poet, then, is never exhausted, and the poet is revealed not to be the arbiter and dispenser of absolute wisdom, but merely a person reinventing attention, who tomorrow must step in and do it again.”

Understood, then, not only as a means of scaffolding content, but also as a mechanism for rendering the dynamism of human cognition and meaning-making, the descriptive-meditative structure is an apt heuristic for exploring the theme of humans’ indeterminate relationship to the natural environment—a task central to the work of ecopoetry. Though the definition of ecopoetics

can be (and is) the subject of many essays, for the sake of this essay, ecopoetry can be understood as what Laura-Gray Street terms “a paradigm shift” or “a way of thinking ecocentrically rather than anthropocentrically” (xxxviii). In the editor’s preface to *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, co-editors Street and Ann Fisher-Wirth speak to the ways ecopoetry makes visible the limitations of human intellect and perception: “What we humans disregard, what we fail to know and grasp, is easy to destroy: a mountaintop, a coral reef, a forest, a human community. Yet poetry returns us in countless ways to the world of our senses [...] This is the power of all poetry. With regard to the environment, it is particularly the power of ecopoetry.” (xxvii). One of ecopoetry’s primary functions, then, is to humble the human intellect—to bring awareness to the categories, classifications, and phenomena that have been subjected to human ignorance.

Relatedly, as Forrest Gander articulates in *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics*, ecopoetry can help us imagine more ethical, respectful, and sustainable ways of relating to our environment. He writes, “It’s been suggested that ecopoetries, by offering revised, less dogmatically binary perspectives of interaction between human and nonhuman realms, suggest ways of being in the world that might lead to less exploitative and destructive histories” (15). These “perspectives of interaction,” are of particular interest to me as a poet. How might I, as a writer of indeterminate ethnic, social, and racial identity bring awareness to the ways in which my perspective of the world impacts my relationship to the environment? How might my own experiences of indeterminacy enact a paradigmatic shift that reveals information about the indeterminacy present in the world around me?

Such questions led me to the work of poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, whose book of poetry *Hello, the Roses*, launches a poignant investigation into human relationships with flora, both literal and figurative, physical, and imaginative. Berssenbrugge, who is recognized widely for the

phenomenological lens through which she examines the intersections of visual art, science, and human consciousness, is also a poet of mixed racial/ethnic identity, who began her career during the multicultural movement of the 1970s. In the essay “The Seamless World,” Sueyeun Juliette Lee asserts that Berssenbrugge’s involvement in Asian American and multicultural literary communities, while often overlooked by contemporaries and critics alike, is foundational to an understanding of her poetics. According to Lee, Berssenbrugge’s “generous, self-reflexive ethics of attention offers powerful possibilities for recalibrating our orientation in a world that insists on affirming divisive visibilities” (54). In other words, by bringing attention to the ways in which all humans perceive and construct their own realities, her poetry makes for an intriguing case study on the subject of indeterminacy.

Though many of the poems in *Hello, the Roses* would prove fruitful for analysis, the poem “Slow Down, Now,” immediately caught my attention: it utilizes a contemporary variation on the descriptive-meditative structure to explore, as Lee articulates, “how landscapes permeate, and are permeated by, our attention” (65). The poem’s lyric speaker describes an encounter with an “Apache plume” (Berssenbrugge 52), also known by its scientific name, *Fallugia paradoxa*—a small, flowering perennial shrub found in the southwestern United States and Northern Mexico, whose common name is derived from the appearance of its feathery purplish fruit clusters, which are said to resemble an Apache headdress. The plant’s common name bears the imprint of imperialist systems of linguistic classification and categorization—one that is undeniably marked by a tradition of violence, racism, and appropriation of Indigenous culture. Given the weight of this linguistic signification, Berssenbrugge’s choice to invoke the common name can only be read as intentional—intentionally positioned in the second section of the poem (and thus, an auxiliary way of identifying the plant), and intentionally juxtaposed with lines that put pressure

on the anthropocentric consequences of naming (a topic to which this essay will return). Over the course of the poem, the speaker moves from observations of the shrub and its ecosystem to associational musings on roses and relationality—the former inspired by the “white-rosette”-like flowers of the Apache, and the latter, the memory of a rose “in the garden of [a late] friend” (51, 54). As these observations and musings build upon one another, the speaker becomes increasingly interested in examining the nature of her relationship to the Apache—or, rather, the Apache’s relationship to her. “When a plant receives [...] [human] communication, it begins altering chemicals its wavelengths reflect, in order to offer itself to your imaginal sight, for you to gather it,” she posits (53). In moving between a formal, scientific register (e.g., “chemicals” and “wavelengths”) and witty, self-aware poetic diction (e.g., “imaginal sight,”) Berssenbrugge’s speaker seems to simultaneously highlight and challenge the perceptual and linguistic barriers that separate her from the plant. “Looking at the plant releases my boundaries,” Berssenbrugge writes, gesturing to the work of the poem itself (51). The narrator’s subject matter, which includes “communication,” “livingness,” “meaning,” “beauty” “emotion,” “illness,” “energy,” and “interactions” (53-54), is complex, abstract, indeterminate—characteristics that enable her to engage in a radically creative and genuine attempt to characterize human presence in the ecosystem from an ecological perspective. Lee identifies similar intentions and outcomes in Berssenbrugge’s earlier verse collections: “By leaving aside fixed or definitional understandings of identity, in favor of highly nuanced attention to space and self, Berssenbrugge is able to soften our imagination of the boundaries that differentiate the self from the world” (Lee 65). That is, by providing insight into the ways embrace of indeterminacy enables new modes of interaction with the environment, Berssenbrugge revives the descriptive-meditative lyric through an ecopoetic lens.

Appearing in the second section of *Hello the Roses*, “Slow Down, Now” is divided into four distinct sections, each numbered and contained on its own page. As in a traditional descriptive-meditative poem, the poem reads as a “dramatic lyric” addressed to the reader (Marks 125, 136), at first obliquely, and, in the latter half of the poem, directly via second person pronouns. At times, this style of address, like the imperative title, reads didactically or notationally. Take, for example, this line from the poem’s third section—“The internal chemistry of plants is one primary language of response that they possess” (Berssenbrugge 53) —written as much for the speaker's sake as the reader’s. At all times, in keeping with the tradition of eco-poetics, the speaker adopts what Gander terms a “stance of self-reflexivity,” or a visceral consciousness of positionality’s limitations and an attempt to characterize the landscape, rather than the mind, as the place from which the poem originates and returns—even if, “we can’t, in any case, extricate ourselves from [nature]”(Gander 2, 11). “It’s not a metaphor for the flow of our surroundings” Berssenbrugge’s speaker asserts of the Apache plume and her musings on it (Berssenbrugge 52). To be clear, as literary critic Dorothy Wang articulates, “[i]t is not that Berssenbrugge rejects either metaphors or things; she rejects the false binary” (Wang 255); for Berssenbrugge, both the complete aestheticization of a landscape and the absence of any attempt to interact with or describe it are mistaken. Instead, the force of Berssenbrugge’s statement lies in the clear rejection of an absolute stance, which is aided in part by the end-stop (one of Berssenbrugge’s characteristic formal devices). Indeed, the poem takes the form of Berssenbrugge’s signature syntactically complete long lines, which Lee suggests “can be viewed as a formal strategy for infiltrating the imagined seams between thought, self, and world” (69). Though a slight departure from Ron Silliman’s “new sentence,” Berssenbrugge’s sentence is

likewise “a unit of measure,” one that is separated by white space on the page and draws attention to the ‘in-betweenness’ of every thought, every person, every encounter (70).

While prose-like, end-stopped lines may seem at odds with a poetic structure that traditionally derives meaning through stanzaic turns, Berssenbrugge’s lines allow her to posit both observations and meditations without relying on an overly stable narrative progression or artificially imposed lyricism. Instead, the spaces and leaps between lines more accurately trace the process by which the mind collects information and establishes meaning: accretion (70).

Take, for example, the first three lines of the poem’s second section:

I repeat the words freshness, tenderness, softness, the happiness of birds, as if speaking directly to the plant.

Sun lights the profusion of pink plumes, thousands of feathery seeds already reaching into empty space where I’ve taken a branch.

That space was left open by the vision I’m having now! (Berssenbrugge 52)

In the first line, Berssenbrugge’s speaker narrates her own mind at work in the process of description—namely, the words and phrases she selects to represent her experience of viewing or interacting with the plant. These descriptors seem less a reflection of the plant itself and more so a reflection of the speaker’s internal emotional state or mood: “freshness, tenderness, softness, happiness of birds” are just as suited to describing a romantic relationship or fond memory as to the plant before her. Yet the speaker seems to recognize the intrusion of her own subjectivity, noting in an equally ironic and sincere manner that her repetition is akin to a conversation with the plant—one, on her end, mediated through language and human consciousness. This realization of subjectivity is magnified in the jump to the following line, which begins by describing, in a somewhat more scientific manner, how the sun interacts with the plumes—a physical attribute of the plant. According to the speaker, the sunlight illuminates “thousands of feathery seeds”—a number, given the impracticability of counting each seed, readers can safely

assume is an estimation and thereby a means of conveying scale or magnitude rather than precise scientific measurements. This sense of relative scale is heightened both by the speaker's alliterative diction ("profusion of pink plumes") and personification of the seeds ("reaching"). These poetic devices mark the presence of the speaker's linguistic and, thereby, subjective choices, which are once again acknowledged by the speaker, who has "taken a branch," perhaps both literally and figuratively: the speaker has physically removed a portion of the plant and also taken the liberty of characterizing that plant with poetic finesse. The third line picks up where the second trailed off—in "empty space,"—a space quickly filled by the narrator's own "vision," a term whose ambiguity leaves open the possibility of literal sight, imagination, revelation, or all of the above. The speaker's exclamation thereby acts as a marker of hyperbolic, rapid, and dynamic cognitive and perceptual processes: it highlights the way in which each thought and line has compounded to reveal the speaker's complex and paradoxical relationship to the plant.

The work of accrual, then, is not only one of compounding, but of unsettling. Lee, responding to Barbara Guest's description of Berssenbrugge's line as 'perilous,' magnifies this inherent untidiness, or indeterminacy, of accretion through lineation:

The 'peril' of Berssenbrugge's poetry is that it draws the reader's attention to the very limits of perception, inviting us to observe the subtle shifts and grains in how we observe the world and our place in it. Such an enterprise hovers in an ambiguous space that is both central to, and on the margins of, cognition and subjectivity. To be alert, and aware, in the manner that Berssenbrugge's poetry invites us to be, requires in some sense a relinquishment of our sense of self. (Lee 69)

Indeed, to read Berssenbrugge's poetry, one must learn to, as the poem's title suggests "Slow Down"—to examine the mind's tendency to occlude detail, gloss over nuance, shift associationally. Berssenbrugge's lines hold space—literally and figuratively—for the mind's capricious nature: changes, modifications, and contradictions accrete both within and across the lines, forcing the reader to follow the unfolding of a thought across a sentence and to pause at its

closure, soaking in a temporary and illusory stability or fixedness. In the jump to the following line, the reader is forced to contend not only with the speaker's indeterminate "cognition and subjectivity" (Lee 69), but also their own: like Otremba's descriptive-meditative speaker, the reader must "reinvent attention" with each new line. I argue, then, that "subtle shifts," "ambiguous space," and "relinquishment of [...] self" are all traits characteristic of not just Berssenbrugge's lines, but also the descriptive-meditative lyric, and, therefore, productive starting points from which to understand how Berssenbrugge revitalizes that structure.

As Marks confirms, "the success of a descriptive-meditative poem doesn't depend as much on what is described as on how it's described, and on how the poem establishes a descriptive frame for a meditation that moves between outward and inward landscapes, dramatizing a mind in the process of change" (135). For Berssenbrugge, that "how" is a sustained and non-linear movement between the speaker's empirical observations of the plant, self-narration of her own embodied experience and cognition, and simultaneously ironic and sincere declarations that function to provide meta-commentary on subjectivity and relationality. While the connections between lines may appear arbitrary upon a first read, I suggest that they are, instead, masterfully associational: each line marks a shift from one mode of expression to another, and oftentimes, foreshadows how the accretion of these shifts inspires a paradigmatic shift in the speaker. The poem's first seven lines exemplify the mechanism of this structure aptly:

I've been sitting looking at a plant, without feeling time at all, and my breathing is calm.

There are tiny white rosettes, and the whole bush is a glory of feathery pink seedheads, here in the arroyo.

Even with closed eyes I see roses in the center of my sight, new ones opening with pink petals illuminated by low sun behind me, and gray-green leaves.

There's no stopping this effusion.

Looking at the plant releases my boundaries, so time is not needed for experience.

Late afternoon is like a stage, a section of vaster landscape, and my mood is of a summer idyll.

The dry arroyo sparkles all around. (Berssenbrugge 51)

The first line is meditative: a lyric speaker, who, proclaiming to have spent time observing a yet unspecified “plant,” gains awareness of her own breath, marking the speaker’s heightened attention to her mental and physical states (Berssenbrugge 51). The shift to the second line is one of sharpening observation: in a subtly expository manner, the speaker describes the plant in greater detail, and identifies their (hers and the plant’s) location “in the arroyo,” a geographical feature found primarily in the southwestern United States—presumably in New Mexico where Berssenbrugge resides. While the speaker’s descriptions of the plant’s physical characteristics orient the reader in time and space (another signifier of the descriptive-meditative structure), they also carry symbolic weight as images. The plant, rendered through descriptions of its “tiny white rosettes” (language borrowed from Elizabeth Bishop’s description of the eponymous creature in “The Fish”) and “feathery pink seedheads,” connotes purity, delicacy, femininity, and fertility; meanwhile, “the arroyo,” a steep-sided gully formed by fast-flowing water, might be understood as a space of potential flow and change—a channel, both literally and figuratively. Read partially as a proffering of literary symbols, the second line primes the reader for the return to mediation in the third line, when the speaker notes that, with eyes closed, she “see[s],” or envisions, a picture-perfect, classic pink rose. Seen by the ‘mind’s eye’ rather than the literal, perceptual eye, the rose must be understood not as a continuation of the speaker’s observations, but a personal imagining—one that gestures to the symbolic ‘baggage’ accompanying imagery of the book’s eponymous roses. Nevertheless, Berssenbrugge’s diction is relatively scientific in nature: the position of the sun and the precise shade of the leaves’ colors are physical characteristics, and thereby a means of “delicate” empirical classification or categorization (51). The term “delicate”

itself accomplishes an ironic and self-conscious reversal: rather than describing the plant as “delicate,” the speaker describes the empiricism itself as “delicate,” or imbued with fragility, drawing attention to the slipperiness of attribution or representation. Just as in the passage from the third section, the speaker’s alternating descriptive and meditative impulses—a discerningly scientific eye and a self-consciously literary mind—become the central tension of the poem. The phrases “delicate empiricism,” “I’ve taken a branch,” “tiny white rosettes,” and “something rose-colored,” (51, 53-54) are compelling because they indicate the speaker’s attempt to both classify/quantify and also gesture to something outside of classification/quantification. The tonal ambiguity or doubleness of the language reflects the speaker’s consciousness of the paradoxes by which poets characterize their relationship to the natural world.

“There’s no stopping this effusion” proclaims the speaker, referencing the outpouring of romantic sentiment just as much as the outpouring of new buds from the plant (Berssenbrugge 51). The absence of an explicit referent from which to read “this effusion” establishes a space of productive ambiguity, or indeterminacy, by allowing for a simultaneity of both descriptive and narrative modes of knowing. Tonally, this simultaneity is equally sincere and ironic: the statement is accurate, and the semantic overlap is satisfying, or even amusing. And in eliciting these affectual responses, the simultaneity foreshadows the speaker’s capacious paradigmatic shift in the fifth line: the phrase “there’s no stopping,” primes the reader for an inevitability—an unfolding or unearthing that is beyond the speaker’s control. Indeed, the unfolding is a “release”—one expressed with confidence and mobilized via the act of “looking.” The speaker’s realization of simultaneity in the acts of meditation and description corresponds to a realization of interactive reciprocity, or simultaneous ‘gaze,’ between speaker and plant, one akin to the reciprocal gaze between speaker and animal in Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Fish.” Like Bishop’s

narrator, Berssenbrugge's narrator tracks what Mark Doty terms "the pathways of scrutiny," or the processes by which an individual in the act of description recognizes the impossibility of objectively representing an 'other' (whether fish or plant), and in doing so, becomes self-conscious of her role in the interaction (Doty 61). Thus, by "[l]ooking at the plant" (Berssenbrugge 51), the speaker gains "reflexive awareness" (Doty 61) and fulfills the interactive quality of the exchange by mirroring the plant's "effusion" through an effusive behavior of her own, the relinquishment of "boundaries" (Berssenbrugge 51). The boundary-less "experience" does not require "time" —an anthropocentric means of evaluating or characterizing the relationship (a definition this essay will later revisit). Read as such, the paradigmatic shift is a movement away from the definite, the quantifiable, the linear.

Yet, like all the other perceptual shifts, this one is fleeting. In the sixth line, the speaker reattends to the lyric's potential trappings of performativity by likening the afternoon to a "stage" and characterizing her mood as one of "idyll" (a potential allusion to Tennyson). Still, this scene, like the line in which it is reproduced, is only a "section of vaster landscape," one piece of a greater whole. As Wang affirms, "Like identity, poetry is performative, contingent—contingent in the sense of both relational and dependent upon something else" (Wang 260). That "something else" shows up in the seventh line, when the arroyo, devoid of water and glistening like a mirage, envelops the speaker and plant (Berssenbrugge 51).

Severed from the context of the larger poem, my reading of shifts between these initial seven lines might appear overwrought; while I fully recognize their conjectural nature, I posit them as a foreshadowing of larger themes and concerns that develop more fully over the poem's course. Even if the lines are not to be read chronologically or linearly, their cumulative thematic character aids the reader in recognizing when the speaker's descriptions of, mediations on, and

declarations about the Apache plume and relationality are reconstrued and recontextualized in meaningful ways.

Perhaps the most essential of these descriptive and meditative recontextualizations (which might also be understood as ‘re-description,’ or the third movement in a traditional descriptive-meditative structure) is the speaker’s reframing of her relationship to the Apache plume in the poem’s second section, as exemplified in the following three lines:

I hold my first sight of the Apache plume and this moment next to each other; I go back and forth comparing them.

I see her multiple aspects as living representations, her symbiosis with birds, relation to originary plants, fragrance, one as medicine administered by an oracle.

These aspects are not referred to, not associative, but intrinsic to my sight, as slowly gaps diminish and missing images appear or experience fills in; one transforms to another along an extended multidimensional axis of seeing the plant. (Berssenbrugge 52)

First, the speaker employs a comparative lens to see the plant ‘anew.’ She superimposes her memory of a first encounter with the Apache plume onto the image of the current encounter, enacting Wordsworth’s “two consciousnesses,” which Marks describes as a “device of aligning memory with immediate perception” (Marks 124). Berssenbrugge’s speaker uses this superimposition to interrogate ways of “seeing” the plant. Referring to the plant with the pronoun “her” (which grants decisively more subjectivity than the pronoun ‘it’), Berssenbrugge’s speaker breaks out of the framework of her initial ‘gaze’ by recognizing that the Apache plume’s relationality extends beyond an anthropocentric paradigm. The Apache plume maintains a symbiotic relationship with birds, shares commonalities with the larger rose family evolutionarily (a nod to the collection’s title), and communicates through its “internal chemistry” or “fragrance” (Berssenbrugge 52-3). As the speaker further elaborates, these characteristics exist irrespective of humans: they are not “referred to,” or ‘named;’ not “associative,” or derived solely from human systems of representational, linguistic, or cultural frameworks. Instead, they

are “intrinsic” to the speaker’s “sight,” a mode of knowing or perceiving not based on imperialistic systems of naming, claiming, classifying, or determining. The speaker’s process of seeing is fluid and dynamic rather than linear and fixed.

The process by which the speaker achieves this realization is described in the latter half of the poem’s first section, when the speaker likens an encounter with a landscape to an encounter with meaning (Berssenbrugge 51). According to the speaker, the initial encounter, which “strikes [one] first as a general impression,” evokes an affective response—one characterized by the suffusion of an emotion, such as “joy.” While the contrast between a strike’s sharpness or suddenness and suffusion’s gradual permeation may seem counterintuitive, framed in terms of natural phenomena, it is an apt descriptor. Imagine, for example, the way the sun’s rays strike one suddenly and then slowly radiate warmth throughout the body; or the way that raindrops strike the ground with immediacy, and then more gradually form a puddle or a flow. Meaning strikes one similarly: aging and the death of friends strike suddenly, and then more gradually begin to incorporate into the framework of daily life (e.g., we think about a deceased friend and miss them, realize how much time has passed since we last did x or y). During the first phase of the process, meaning is something external or not yet incorporated by the individual’s consciousness: it is “not unified with [...] experience as a whole,” just as sight is not panoramic, but limited by the range of its faculties and the time needed for processing—by the mechanics of ‘zooming out.’ The tension inherent in this externality is uncomfortable, anticipatory. It is characterized by the speaker as an “impasse between [...] will, desire, and the resistance of a phenomenon to reveal itself.” The resolution comes when the speaker instead, heeds the imperative to “slow down.” In doing so, she allows the eye and the mind to

“disengage,” to lose focus. Then, just as suddenly as the first image struck, the full landscape embeds itself in the mind’s eye, or “meaning as a whole interweaves with [her] perception.”

It is no accident that a temporal shift is key to the incorporation of an image or meaning into larger frameworks of a landscape or the mind, respectively. As in the speaker’s earlier release of “boundaries,” figured as an experience independent of time, a “disengagement” with an image or preexisting concept is figured as an experience dependent upon ‘slow-motion.’ Shifts in temporal perception, then, are linked to changes in subjectivity. As Doty maintains, “[h]ow it feels to be oneself’ has a great deal to do with the experience of time” (60). By extension, a shift in the experience of time might point toward a shift in how it feels to be that self. Berssenbrugge herself affirms this connection. In the poem “Matter,” she writes, “[w]e call change in a person the effect of time. /It separates everything you were from what happens now” (18). That is, changes, or shifts, are marked temporally. They can only be mapped comparatively (‘from then to now’), and thereby, a realization must be preceded by temporal disengagement—one that allows the speaker space to move ‘from then to now’ and subsequently, consciously recognize that the movement occurred.

Here lie the stakes of Berssenbrugge’s descriptive-meditative lyric: experiences of temporal shifts correspond to the speaker’s “reinvent[ion] [of] attention” (Otremba)—the structural movement from meditation to re-description. As Marks reminds us, “what gives [descriptive-meditative] poems their power is [...] meditation” (136). Definitionally, “meditation,” might be understood not only as in Western contexts as “continuous thought or musing upon one subject or series of subjects,” but also, “in Buddhism, Yoga, and other systems of religious or spiritual discipline: a practice of the mind (and body) aimed at achieving the eradication of rational or worldly mental activity” (“meditation n.1”). Put simply, meditation

might be understood as, in the words of my former Zen teacher, “direct perception into the present moment.” When understood not solely as a self-indulgent, intellectual processing of the mind, but a radically attentive presence to nuance, meditation becomes what Lee means when she describes a “relinquishment of our sense of self” (69). Doty concurs: “[s]elf-forgetful concentration is [...] an absorption in the moment, a pouring of the self into the now” (63).

Berssenbrugge’s observations and scientific classifications illuminate not only the descriptive act of perceiving the state of a present moment, but also illuminate that which cannot be simultaneously perceived or understood; to look, one must inherently choose where to look, and in choosing, we are unable to see all at once, to perceive all at once, to truly know all. In this way, the indeterminate, or unperceivable, envelops one, as joy suffices Berssenbrugge in the poem. The embrace of the indeterminate, then, enacts a radical participation in the environment—an acknowledgement of both separation and interconnectivity.

Perhaps it is through this understanding of description and meditation that Berssenbrugge manages to affirm the in-between-ness, relationality, interdependence, and dynamism of all phenomena without enacting the traditional descriptive-meditative lyric’s tidy ‘epiphany.’ An attentive, self-relinquished presence allows Berssenbrugge’s narrator to interact with the plant in a radical way: to recognize the plant’s communicative processes, or “language of response;” to observe how a “plant or another person awakes from embedding in the livingness of the world and takes notice of your request” (53); to realize that “organisms can intentionally insert information to strengthen cooperative interactions among, for example, an Apache plume, ants and an agave in the riverbed, like human families whose interweaving, loving bonds represent the long term incorporation of supportive, coevolutionary fields continually embedding complex new data” (54). Berssenbrugge’s narrator’s true paradigmatic shift is her ability to find solace in

new forms of relationality: to enact a new framework of interaction with the plants. Her understanding of the Apache plume becomes an awakening, a greeting, a gesture; just as the collection's title addresses the roses directly, Berssenbrugge herself addresses her plant with genuine and effusive feelings of appreciation and joy.

Conclusion

Through close readings of poems in Mia Ayumi Malhotra's *Isako Isako* and Mei-Mei Bursenbrugge's *Hello, The Roses*, this essay suggests the ways in which contemporary modes of poetic documentation, description, and meditation can counteract the erasure wrought by the ongoing mechanisms and legacies of imperialism. The frameworks of the Asian American avant-garde and ecopoetry help me, as a poet, to explore the ways in which poetry can facilitate destabilization of existing centers of power; reclamation of bodily, mental, and environmental autonomy and integrity; figuration of a lyric speaker as multi-faceted, self-aware, and accountable for the limitations of individual perception; and investment in more holistic, curious, adaptive engagement with the world. Malhotra and Bursenbrugge exemplify the ways in which embrace of, rather than rejection or lamentation of, indeterminacy can empower the poetic speaker to reframe their complex and nuanced relationships to history, family, language, and the environment as expansive, generative, and reciprocal—to engage in an ethical, embodied poetic praxis. Indeed, as Som suggests, “sonar,” like the poet, “searches the sea by singing”: a poem reflects in language only that which the poet is willing to search for in the unknown—the world within and beyond the self.

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